

KENTUCKY WOMAN

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DEDICATION

To Della, a kindred spirit

To Mark, boyfriend extraordinaire

I owe you both.

KENTUCKY WOMAN

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Chapter 1

Northern Kentucky Autumn 1862

"Where is everyone?"

Brow furrowed, Jessie McGee glanced around the eerily empty dooryard of the Travers farm. The silence swirling around her pounded in her ears and the lack of any activity in the middle of the day caused her heart to skip a beat. For a moment she sat stock-still, struggling to understand the absence of everything—no people, no sounds, no movement.

She gathered her skirts and jumped from the wagon. Racing onto the porch, her boots pounded against the planks, echoing the hammering of her heart. She flung open the door and ran into her father's house, nearly colliding with a broken bench. Stumbling to a halt in the open doorway, her breath caught as she gazed at the destruction.

The room looked as though a tornado had just touched down. Broken dishes and shards of glass littered the floor. The cloth crumpled beneath the table held dirty footprints. The stuffing of a slashed and overturned chair dappled the floor like small puffy clouds. As she moved, the skirt swirling around her legs caught the

fluff and spun it into a fuzzy cyclone. Her father's prized book collection dotted the pine boards, islands of bright color in a dark sea. Their cracked spines peaked like tiny mountain ranges. She held back tears when she saw the beautiful clock that had ticked off the moments of her mother's happy life lying broken on the floor. She shook her head, blinking rapidly, trying desperately to understand.

As she surveyed the devastation, she knew this was nothing. There would be something worse. And in a moment she saw it.

Her brother sat on the floor near the hearth, leaning over an object, struggling to repair something. Jessie's knees buckled, and she reached out and blindly gripped the doorsill. He held her mother's music box, trying to adjust the broken pieces back into the case.

"Martin?" Her voice sounded like someone else's.

His head whipped up and he shook curling tendrils of dark hair out of his eyes. He lurched to his feet and ran to her, nearly knocking her over with his weight as he smashed into her. He wrapped his arms around her and she cuddled him against her. Even her numbed mind realized he had grown in the last five months—grown taller, but still thin. She felt his shoulder blades jutting beneath her hands.

Terrified to ask, Jessie glanced over his shoulder at the closed bedroom doors and forced the question out of her mouth. "Where's Pa?"

Martin pulled back a little, peering straight into her eyes. Despite the ruin around her, she felt a sense of loss because he no longer had to look up at her. They were the same size and he'd soon out-distance her. Her little brother had grown up. Martin's voice caught in his throat.

"He got sick, Jessie, real sudden. I wanted to send someone, but she wouldn't let me. Then later there was no one to send."

She nodded dumbly and blinked at the tears she refused to shed.

"I buried him day before yesterday. I'm sorry."

Martin took a deep breath, trying to find the future man within himself. Her heart nearly broke as she watched the struggle on his boyish face. Finally he burst into tears and she clutched him closer, holding onto him, listening to him cry. The hot, wet tears of his sorrow soaked her hair and one thought reverberated through her mind—a boy of twelve shouldn't have to bury his father alone. The calm quiet leaking through the open doorway caused her body to tremble as a wave of anxiety crashed over her. Once again she thought there should be voices calling to one another as laborers worked, sounds of livestock moaning for their afternoon meal, the crash of a hammer against an anvil as Phillip, the blacksmith, repaired implements. She realized Marcus had not come out of the barn to take care of Butterscotch.

Glancing at the door, Jessie sniffed, trying to discern the tantalizing aromas of fried chicken, roasted pork or stews that usually drifted toward the house from the kitchen outbuilding. Her stomach growled. She'd been hoping to find Glory and Delia preparing the mid-day meal. She dropped her arms as she noticed another absence.

"Where's Ellie?"

Martin scrubbed at his eyes with his fists, an action so reminiscent of his babyhood. Jessie's heart continued to shatter.

"Out in the barn. She won't let me near there. She's looking for something. I don't know what it is, but she's looked everywhere." Martin flung his arm out, his confused eyes wide. "She did all this yesterday after they left. I couldn't stop her. She went crazy or something."

"Or something." Jessie cast another glance toward the ripped upholstery, the tossed books and their mother's broken clock. But her gaze lingered on the scattered pieces of the music box. Ellie would pay for that. She had destroyed Martin's only real memory of their mother. Jessie reached down and grabbed a hunk of stuffing, clenching it in her fist. "That bitch thinks Pa has money stashed somewhere."

Jessie kicked at a broken chair leg, sending it spinning across the floor. She stormed across the room, flinging everything from her path.

She couldn't find enough to kick, to throw. Martin dodged around her and scrambled to collect the pieces of the music box out of her path of anger, wrapping them in a towel. Finally, she clutched at a heavy iron candlestick and hurled it at the wall. A large chunk of plaster clunked to the ground. Her head cleared when a cloud of dust spewed like a tiny volcano. As it drifted and settled, her world seemed to come into focus, but she knew she'd never forgive Ellie for that look on Martin's face.

She blew out an angry breath, whirled around and stalked toward him. "I'm going to wring her sorry neck, then throw her dead ass out. And after that we'll set things right around here."

He clutched at her arm as she started across the threshold. The look on his face stopped her cold and another wave of dread shuddered over her spine. Once again, she realized how much silence surrounded her and another notable absence. She had to close her eyes for a minute to stop the world from spinning.

"You said you buried Pa alone, Marty. Where's Jane?"

Martin's voice seemed so small, the frightened squeak of a child in the dark. "Someone took her. Someone took all of them. I couldn't stop it."

For the first time, Jessie noticed the dark bruise on Martin's cheek. She reached out and cupped his face. Someone had come into her father's home, abducted their extended family and hit her little brother. Her strength evaporated. She leaned against the door frame and slid to the floor, overwhelmed by the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes. She struggled to hold them back as the sound of crunching stone drew her attention to the dooryard. It took every ounce of strength she had to twist her head to see Ellie Travers stopped on the path, clutching a dirt-covered wooden box tight against her chest.

Ellie glared at her for a moment, then continued up the path, her graceful body sashaying as though she were meeting friends for tea. Streaks of mud dotted her pretty blue dress and a long rip shredded the fabric. She looked like she'd been crawling through the horse

stalls. She fluffed her hair and paused, picking pieces of straw from the disheveled blond curls and flicking them away with an annoyed sigh.

"Can't say I'm happy to see you, Jessie." Ellie hefted the box and moved onto the first riser of the porch. "You always did have poor timing. Not that it makes any difference since I'm the widow this time. Hopefully when I count what's in here we'll find that Jacob left me far more than Frank left you. Your husband probably died on that battlefield like the pauper he always was. You should have married Nathaniel Prentice when he asked for you. You might be wearing more than calico."

"Calico suits me fine," Jessie said. "I wouldn't waste my spit on Prentice. He's no better than the scum on my boot. He kind of reminds me of you."

Ellie heaved a sigh. "But he has a lovely plantation, a house in Maysville and you'd have a far better life than Frank McGee could give. Not that it makes any difference now. He's buried in some trench with the rest of his worthless regiment. Poor little Widow McGee. What's it like living alone on a dirt farm, Jessie?"

Jessie pushed herself to her feet and raked the hair away from her face. "Infinitely more pleasant than living with you."

Ellie clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Is that any way to talk to your stepmother? I raised you from," she paused, a frown creasing her smooth forehead, "well, I don't know how old you were. About his age." She waved her hand at Martin.

"It seems so much longer," Jessie said sweetly, taking a step toward Ellie. Her stepmother backed off the riser. "Now get your ass in the house. We have some talking to do."

"I'm done talking with you," Ellie said.

"Then we have a problem because I have lots of questions, and your answers better be good. Ready for the first one?" Jessie took another step forward. Ellie stood straighter, but a tight gulp locked in her throat. "What happened to my brother's face, Ellie?"

Ellie thrust out her chin. "He got hit. I don't know how. It happened before I got to the house. Ask him."

"I'll ask him later, and if your stories don't match, we'll be discussing it again."

"I raised him, Jessie McGee. I—"

"Jane raised me!" Martin said.

"But I was your father's wife," Ellie spat. "Not that it made any difference to her."

"She loves me!" Martin cried. "More'n you ever did."

Jessie tilted her head and studied her stepmother. "Which all leads to the second question. Where is she?"

Ellie cocked her head. "Why would I tell you that?"

Jessie's fists tightened and she ground out each word through clenched teeth. "Because if you don't, Ellie, you're going to be the sorriest bitch this side of the Ohio. I'll make sure of that. Where is Jane?"

Ellie tossed her golden curls and Jessie wanted to snatch her bald. "I told Jacob to sell her off years ago, but he wouldn't. You brats always had him wrapped around your fingers. Jane this, Jane that. She had a higher place in this family than she deserved."

Ellie shut up when Jessie took a step forward. "She was always closer to a mother than you, Ellie. We love her. We always have. Pa loved her too."

"Ha!" Ellie lifted her chin. "No wonder. She's been your father's mistress for years. But of course he kept that from you. Jacob's gone now and I'm finally rid of her. The collectors came yesterday, carted away all the silver and jewelry, took the livestock, all but one horse, and loaded the slaves into a wagon. All *five* of them. Good riddance."

Jessie barely heard a word. Her father and Jane? Jessie glanced at Martin. He looked sick, but Jessie couldn't tell whether it resulted from this new knowledge or losing the only mother-figure he'd ever had. Either way she wanted to kick Ellie's ass. This was the woman she'd trusted with her treasure? She'd probably stood by and watched

a young boy get slapped by a grown man. She wanted to kick her own ass for allowing it.

Nausea coiled in her gut and for a horrible moment she feared she'd be sick on the porch. She took a deep breath, willing the queasiness away. She shook her head furiously, trying to make sense of it all. This had been a horrible mistake, but she could fix it. She stared at Ellie and spoke slowly.

"Listen to me. If Pa's dead, they're all free now. Jane isn't a slave any longer. None of them are. It's in his will they're to be legally freed at his death. We discussed it, Ellie. I know that's what he planned."

Ellie adjusted her box and plunged her hand into the pocket of her dress. She pulled out a crumpled paper and waved it in front of Jessie's face. "You mean this worthless piece of rubbish?"

When Jessie snatched at it, Ellie reared back. "Oh, no. It's the only bargaining chip I have. How much is it worth to the proud and mighty Travers clan?"

Jessie took another step forward, using every determined inch of her five-foot frame. "Give me that paper, you witch."

Ellie shook her head. "No, everything's mine now. Whatever's in this box belongs to me and this plantation belongs to me. I'm going to sell this property and move into the city where I belong."

Jessie snorted. "This was never a plantation on its best day. And looking around I'd say it's now gone from a reasonably productive farm into a hunk of useless land. In case you hadn't noticed, Ellie, you're standing in a doomed landscape. We're in the middle of a war. Now give me the paper, then we're going to open that box and you're going to give Martin his share."

Ellie backed up, struggling to hold on to the box as her precious cargo slipped in her arms.

Jessie lashed out and gripped her arm hard, hauling her up the stairs. Ellie uttered a squeak in protest, but Jessie ignored her. Martin jumped backward and moved aside as Jessie pushed Ellie into the

house. When Ellie stumbled, Jessie snatched the box out of her arms and slammed it down on the table.

"It's mine," Ellie said. "You have no rights here. You're not even a Travers anymore."

Jessie shoved Ellie into a chair. "Sit down and shut up before I yank the hair right out of your head. I'm not happy with you right now. All you had to do was show them that will. Jane would still be here and I wouldn't be in the midst of an unholy, goddamn mess. Oh, no you don't, Ellie. Sit down. Now."

Jessie flicked the latch on the box and tossed open the lid, wrenching back the red cloth that covered the contents, and plunging her hand inside. She felt the smooth surface of polished wood, and traced along to find the cold sensation of steel. Jessie's fingers curled around the grip and pulled the gun from the box.

"This is a beauty. A Colt. Army issue, I'd say." She glanced at Martin "Did Pa say anything to you about this? Had he intended to join up?"

"Jacob—"

Jessie rounded on Ellie and her stepmother shrank back into the chair. "Was I talking to you? No? Then shut the hell up." She took a deep breath and turned back to her brother. "Marty?"

Her brother's glance ticked between the two women. Jessie nodded, trying to give him a smile of encouragement. She knew she hadn't really succeeded, but Martin held her gaze. "I don't know what Pa was doing. He met with some men out in the barn a couple times last month."

Ellie huffed. "Your father couldn't keep his nose out of politics and those men off this property. We were perfectly fine here until he started stirring things up, the Union this, the Confederacy that. It's a dangerous time and—"

Jessie jabbed her finger into Ellie's chest. "I told you to shut up."

Ellie whined, her mouth in a pout, and rubbed her breastbone. Jessie shoved the gun into her pocket then rooted in the box, searching until she found a leather pouch. She snapped it open and glanced in to see a collection of paper cartridges. She closed it and tucked that into her pocket as well.

"I want that gun," Ellie said. "It's probably worth near twenty dollars."

"Like hell. It's mine now." Jessie shook the cloth and half a dozen gold coins scattered onto the table, clinking and rolling.

Ellie grinned and lunged forward, scooping them into her hands. "And these are mine."

"Give three of those to Martin and we'll call it square," Jessie said. When Ellie shook her head, Jessie winked. "I think you're forgetting who's claimed the gun. And I can load it pretty fast."

"Fine." Ellie gritted her teeth and tossed some coins toward Martin. "But he only gets two."

"Give him another. An apology for that bruise on his face."

"I didn't do that!"

"Sin of omission, Ellie."

Ellie fingered one of the coins in her hand, her pout growing more pronounced, but finally flipped it toward him. Martin caught it and dropped it in his pocket.

"I didn't want him to get hurt," Ellie muttered.

"Probably not. You were counting on him staying out of the way, but you should have known better than that. He's a Travers." Jessie held out her hand. "I'll take the will, if you please."

Ellie shoved her hand in her pocket, then thrust the paper against Jessie's chest, crumpling it in her fist. "Take it and choke on it." Jessie straightened it out, folded it and put it in her pocket. "But it's too late. You'll never find her, and if you do, you'll probably be sorry."

Jessie clutched at the back of a chair as a sudden dizziness swamped her. "Who took her?"

Ellie's lips curled, but something about the smile on her stepmother's face chilled her and Jessie prepared for the worst. "That

piece of scum on your boot—Nathaniel Prentice. Seems your father owed him some money. Despite her annoying and unwelcome presence in this house and your father's misplaced affection for her, Jane's a lovely woman, don't you think? Should make a fine whore. At least Nathaniel thought so."

Jessie reared back, putting all her strength into the slap that hit Ellie full on the cheek. The crack echoed in the quiet room as Ellie screeched and Martin gasped. Ellie raised her hand to the side of her face, rubbing at the reddening streak. Her slender body shook with fury as she slowly stood.

She spit the words out through clenched teeth. "I want one of those coins back."

"I'll owe you," Jessie growled.

Ellie's glance darted between Jessie and Martin and finally locked on Jessie. Jessie cocked her head and waited to see what her stepmother had to say because she was more than interested in how Ellie would try to get herself out of this mess.

"I've had it with your holier-than-thou attitude, Jessie McGee. Running your little way station, helping these worthless people, conducting your little piece of that ridiculous railroad. Ha! I should have turned you in months ago. Your father begged me not to and I've no idea why I listened to that idiot."

Jessica stared at Ellie as the words continued to tumble from her mouth. She barely heard them. If her father had known about her way station, how many people in the county knew what she did on her farm?

"Your lofty ideals finally got to him and those men started coming, bringing problems, chaos. I don't give a damn who wins this war as long as people leave me alone. I just wanted to get through this war with enough to survive." She spit in Jessie's direction. "You've made damn sure that won't happen. And you'll pay now, Jessie. I'll make sure of that. I'll turn you in. There's a penalty for helping runaways. Let's see how long you can hold your property. You'll be

lucky if you can keep your cocky ass out of jail. I might even get a reward for helping the cause."

Jessie patted her pocket. "Don't make me load this pistol and put a bullet in your head, Ellie."

"You don't scare me, Jessie. You'll never see that damned woman or any of them again. Give it up and go home. Leave me alone!" Ellie swept the box off the table and it crashed to the floor with a dull thud. Another gold coin spun over the planks and Ellie snatched at it quickly, tucking it into her pocket. She turned to Jessie with a ferocious glare, snarling like a rapid dog. "Get out of my house, you Yankee bitch. And take that whelp with you." She lifted her chin toward Martin.

Jessie's nails bit into her hands. She kept her eyes on Ellie and tried to keep her voice level. "Martin, go pack a bag and bring me a set of your clothes."

Her brother scrambled from the room while she and Ellie glowered at one another. Jessie seriously thought putting a bullet between Ellie's eyes sounded like a fine idea. Wouldn't be much of a loss. She'd never liked her anyway and this time her pa wasn't around to stop her. Her fingers inched to her pocket and slipped inside, but Martin returned more quickly than she expected, hefting a large carpetbag over his shoulder. He tossed a pair of dark brown pants, a jacket and a dingy white shirt on the table.

Jessie started to unbutton her dress as she nodded at the door. "Go water Butterscotch, Marty. We're heading down the road to visit Nathaniel Prentice."

As Martin ran out the door, Jessie dropped her dress to the floor. It landed with a thunk from the weight of the gun. She quickly shed her underskirts and pulled the trousers over her boots and up her legs. She yanked the shirt over her head, ramming the ends into the waistband. She never took her eyes off Ellie as she tugged the suspenders over her shoulders.

"Make yourself useful, Ellie. Find me a hat. I'll be out of your life quicker than you can say 'nasty bitch.'"

Ellie glared, but moved in the direction of the bedrooms. Jessie emptied her dress pockets, her fingers lingering on the crumpled will. How had her father become so sick that he'd died before someone could be sent to fetch her? She couldn't worry about that now. If she allowed her thoughts to stray to her father, she'd lose what strength she had left.

Ellie returned with a hat, one of her father's favorites, and tossed it on the floor at Jessie's feet. The aroma of her father's tobacco drifted in the room, making Jessie's breath catch once again in her chest. Tears threatened to spill but she pushed them back with the memories and forced a laugh from her mouth.

"Always so gracious, Ellie. I can occasionally see why my father married you, but can't say today is one of those days. We're going to need some food too. Make it fast."

Ellie whirled in a flounce of skirts and stalked to the cupboard, slamming the door back on its hinges, cursing and snarling as she crushed biscuits, dried meat and blocks of cheese into checkered cloths. She tied everything with a hunk of string and tossed the bundle onto the table.

Jessie batted her eyelashes. "How about some of that delicious blackberry jam you make?"

Her stepmother spun around and seized a jar off the counter, shoving it into Jessie's outstretched hand. "I wish I'd sprinkled rat poison in it."

"Your charm is poisonous enough, but two jars might be nice."

Ellie slammed her hands down on the table and screeched. "Get out!"

Jessie shrugged into the wool coat and tucked tumbles of unruly dark hair under her father's wide-brimmed hat, pulling it down low on her forehead. She dropped the pistol and ammunition bag into the coat pockets then tucked the will safely inside as well. She shoved her clothing under her arm and gathered the packet of food and jar of jam. She gave Ellie a wink.

"It's been a pleasure to see you again. If you find you have a hard time keeping the place going, you might want to see what Nathaniel Prentice has to offer." Her gaze swept over her stepmother's body. "You still have a few years left in you. I'll put in a good word for you."

Jessie turned with a laugh and strode onto the porch, listening to Ellie's murderous words behind her. Her horse still drank from the trough and Martin had tossed his bag into the wagon. She clapped him on the back, and shoved her dress, underskirts and food into the carpetbag she had left in the wagon bed. She waggled the jar of jam at him.

"She might be a bitch but she makes good jam." She plunged the jar into the bag as Martin smiled at her. It tugged at her heart because she thought it might be her brother's first smile in days. "Let's get away from here, Marty. We've got some people in need of saving."

* * * *

The wagon clattered over the road and each jolt brought another spike of pain to Jessie's head. She'd woken up that morning with a need to see her family and thought she'd have several days before her next passengers arrived at the station. They tended to come every week or so, floating out of the evening mists like ghosts, hoping to find the light and fluttering red signal cloth she always tied to the hitching post in front of the house. She'd feed them, tend to any injuries, bunk them down to sleep in the cubby spaces she'd dug under the floorboards in the barn. She regretted she had so little space, but it was the best she'd been able to eke out on her own. She'd thought when Frank returned, they'd be able to make better accommodations, but of course Frank wasn't coming home. She

didn't know if Frank would have approved of what she did for the runaways, but she hoped he might. Frank had been a decent man.

She expected no one for at least four days so she'd left the livestock in the care of her hired man, Rob, and hopped in the wagon late in the morning with a light heart and a blossoming anticipation to make the two-hour wagon ride to her birthplace. She could have just saddled Butterscotch and made it with a brisk trot in less than half an hour, but Butterscotch was older now and Jessie hated to push her. Besides, she felt no need to hurry and wanted to revel in the beauty of the day. The anticipation of seeing her family seemed half the fun.

A couple of days with her brother and Jane perked her up and her father's adoration forced any negativity from her spirit. Dealing with Ellie had always been torture, but Ellie generally steered clear of her when she visited. She had really needed to hear Jane's laughter, listen to her father's stories and hold Martin against her, even though he was no longer the little boy she'd spent half her life with. Today, she'd needed to be in the company of people who loved her. But now the day had changed.

She glanced behind her into the wagon bed. Martin still slept, his head cradled against their meager luggage. He looked so much younger when he slept. That was the little brother she remembered, not the almost-man he'd become recently. Her heart ached that he'd been left alone to deal with his grief.

The monotonous ride had nearly lulled her into a stupor when she heard the whinny of a horse. She pulled on the reins and Butterscotch halted on the overgrown path. Jessie cocked her head and listened, trying to hear any other sound besides the birds that called to one another in the trees and the occasional scamper of a small animal in the greenery that dotted the trail. When she heard another whinny, she tugged on the reins and guided Butterscotch off the path and into a stand of tall brush. She set the brake, looped the straps around a small sapling and hunkered down behind a scrubby bush.

She heard the horse before she saw it, a steady clomping despite the dangerous ruts that pitted the path. She prepared to breathe a sigh of relief as the horse moved past, but the sounds stopped.

When the deep, rumbling voice reached her nest, her heart hammered and the air locked in her chest.

"Better come out here, boy, I'm a little testy from the condition of this road."

Chapter 2

Cutter Raines watched the slight rustle of the brush with piqued curiosity. It looked like a boy tucked inside the greenery but in his business it was best to be sure. Spying brought hazards most people couldn't even begin to guess. Keeping his cover required concentration, even when lulled to a near doze by the not-so-gentle sway of his horse on the pocked path that passed as a road in this stretch of the county. The war took its toll everywhere, but the absence of hard-working, able men proved the most costly. In this part of the country, he'd be hard pressed to tell which side any one person had chosen. He might as well flip a coin. Even family ties didn't matter.

Raines dismounted and leaned back against a tree, cradling his rifle in the crook of his arm. No need to look more threatening than he already did. He knew how people perceived him and that worked in his favor. It kept the curious an arm's-length away and quickly brought out the trouble in those who might challenge him. Potential risks hovered about both kinds, but if someone planned to cause him trouble he'd just as soon get it over with and back to his mission. Not that he didn't enjoy a little trouble from time to time, but trouble sometimes interfered with his plans and he had no time for it. He'd gotten a couple of busted up fingers the last time real trouble crossed his path. Of course, the other man had fared far worse, might even still be floating down the Ohio.

As Raines waited patiently for the boy in the shrubbery to make his move and show his intent, he gazed down the silent stretch of road before him. His target wasn't much further and he'd make it before nightfall, where he'd camp nearby and wait for dark. He hadn't expected to find any runaways this time of day but he'd kept his eyes peeled in the hopes he might find some in need of his expertise. The boy in the brush wasn't a runaway. He'd caught a glimpse of fair skin when the boy moved. But the little boy playing hide and seek might work for someone with a plan of his own, so Raines settled comfortably back into his role. He adopted his sternest expression and peered at the shrub, willing his prey to step into the open.

The boy stood suddenly, his hand snaking into his pocket in what looked to be an attempt at a surreptitious movement. Not a bad move and it proved the boy would bear watching and might be more of a problem than Raines had originally anticipated. Never hurt to be cautious. His new adversary stepped forward, twisting his body through the brush with a sinuous grace. He shifted sideways and raised his arm. Raines swallowed a laugh when the boy pointed the pistol straight ahead like he planned to shoot him dead, lifted his chin and stared right into his eyes. The boy couldn't be more than fifteen, maybe not even that, but he'd had some training. Raines studied him from under the brim of his hat, perusing his body with a cursory glance to gauge his agility and speed then bit back a smile.

What had made this little chit think she could pass for a boy? Those glossy black curls falling out from under the big hat belonged to no boy, not even the most sheltered. And those green eyes scrutinizing him from beneath the shadow of thick, dark lashes flickered over his frame with the heat of every other woman he'd ever met. He knew what he looked like and an appreciative perusal never surprised him. Some had been more than appreciative. This one had a little more control, though her eyes widened as her gaze roamed over his chest and darted down to his pants. He watched the slender column of her throat—minus the Adam's apple that must have slipped her mind as she dressed for her part—as she swallowed thickly. Her hand wavered slightly as she struggled to hold the heavy gun steady.

He took one more glance because he couldn't afford any more than that. The swell of her jacket and the softly rounded hips beneath the dark, rather threadbare pants made her sex obvious. Not that he needed the proof, but he wanted to see the entire package.

She wore the clothes of an outback farm hand so this little beauty had her own agenda. Though her deception stirred an intense curiosity within him, he really didn't have the time to toy with a woman for his own amusement. He sighed as she studied him. Her eyes offered promise, shining with a dignified pride he found positively alluring. She had no idea how much showed in her eyes. A definite challenge and one that he'd like to pursue in another lifetime. But he was stuck with this one.

His cock hardened in his breeches, surprising him. His interest in women had vanished about the time he'd become a dead man who walked among the living. Doc Winters had called it melancholia but a fancy name didn't make it feel any better or less permanent. Lately, he'd let Billy have all the fun and had merely watched his friend's liaisons because he couldn't muster the enthusiasm. It hardly seemed worth the effort and brought him no joy. But the twitching in his pants signaled things might be looking up. In fact, he felt sure of it, and if it continued, he might need to get a new occupation because he'd sure like to test the promise he saw in those kittenish eyes. A woman with arrogance and courage would offer a whole lot of trouble of the good kind.

He'd play her game. He had a little time till nightfall.

* * * *

"No sudden moves, boy," the man said. "This rifle could accidentally fire in your direction."

Jessie positioned the sight of her own gun directly over his cold, dead heart. A man with a voice like that couldn't possibly have a warm, beating one.

"My gun could accidentally fire as well," she said. "And I'm a little nervous."

The man lounged against a tree, his long body resting against the bark as though he had stopped for a smoke. He held his rifle loosely cradled in the crook of his arm and rubbed an apparent streak on the stock. The rifle was a Henry, one of the new repeating rifles. She'd only seen one before, in the possession of a Union officer who'd come onto her property. How had a man like this gotten hold of a rifle like that? She forced her arm steady as she studied him, weighing her options and gauging her target.

She discerned pretty quickly he wasn't a soldier for one side or the other, at least not that he would admit. Discerning a man or woman's loyalties had become a problem lately. She might as well toss a coin for all the good it did trying to guess. She'd been wrong more than once. This man wore civilian clothes—rough homespun black pants, a solid pair of boots and a previously white shirt, slightly soiled and sweat stained. The clothes might have been loose on any other man but this man's body held so much muscle a loose fit seemed impossible. Even standing relaxed against a tree, his leg muscles strained and flexed against the material. The shirt showed the same promise. And those tight pants held a bulge that strained against the buttons. She rubbed her hand along the back of her suddenly-sweaty neck.

"Well, boy, I might be worried if that pistol was loaded, but since it's not—"

He suddenly propelled himself forward, swinging the rifle in an upside down arc. Before she could move, the barrel cracked against her gun. The pistol flew from her hand and spun several times before slamming back to earth, the barrel plowing into the ground.

"Hey!" she cried.

She marched toward him and shoved him in the chest. He didn't budge. His feet seemed anchored to the ground. She tilted her face up, impossibly up, to glare at him. She'd kill him with her will if

necessary. People usually cowered to one of her moods, and today had definitely created a mood. This backwoods hick would never stand a chance.

Her eyes met the tuft of black hair visible above the collar of his shirt and found the same hair rasped his jaw in a rough, bristly stubble. A stern mouth, almost hidden in the whiskers, seemed to lift slightly when she gulped, but that might have been her imagination. Moving higher, she found deep blue eyes—surprisingly beautiful—fringed with long lashes, but nearly shadowed by dark brows that drew down in a frown and a hat that blanketed his face in a dark cloud. The dark cloud might have been his temper, but she'd take her chances.

Her glance wavered slightly, but she lifted her chin higher and kicked him in the shin. The soft breeze cascading over the lip of the hill looming over them swirled down and chose that moment to blow strands of straight, dark hair across his neck. He continued to stare at her, never moving a muscle, but watching those strands of hair nearly stole her concentration. In fact, his face threatened to make her forget her own name.

Quit looking at him, Jessie.

"That's the only gun I have with me, you hayseed. If you've damaged it, you're giving me that rifle."

"Like hell."

The low growl rumbled around her and vibrated through every fiber of her body. Something deep inside her stirred at the rough sound. She nearly gasped, but controlled it, or tried to control it. She wasn't sure she succeeded. He might be death itself, but this man's voice melted something inside her and she hated him for it. She fought the urge to kick him again.

"We'll see about that."

She whirled around and stalked several yards to the pistol. She yanked it out of the ground, nearly losing her balance. When he chuckled, she swung around, brandishing the gun and a clod of mud

dropped at her feet. She screeched and shook the pistol, furious to see the spatter of dirt and muck that rained down then wiped the barrel against her coat.

"That's a Union-issue pistol," the man said. "Has Kentucky finally made a choice? Which side you on today?"

"Jackass," she muttered. She straightened and turned to him. "Which side I'm on is none of your business. What do you know of Union-issue guns?"

"That's none of *your* business." He cocked a brow, daring her to ask another question.

Jessie continued dumping dirt out of the gun barrel. "Go to hell." Martin's tentative whisper tugged at her attention. "Jessie?"

She didn't take her eyes off the man. "Go back to the wagon, Marty. We'll be on our way in a minute." Her stare raked across the tough, hard body, and she clenched her fist around the butt of the gun as heat rose in her face. "This gentleman needed to be told where to go."

"I know where I'm going, boy. Have my doubts about you though. Hiding in the bushes seems a bit clandestine to me."

She continued to wipe invisible dirt from the gun then stuck her finger inside. "A bit like roving a decaying back road used only by locals?" She peered at him from the corner of her eye. "And what would you know about clandestine activities?"

"More than a half-grown boy." He glanced to where Martin stood, spying on them through the bushes. "Or two put together."

He studied her hard for a moment, and she met his stare. When his eyes lingered on her chest, she tugged at the edges of her jacket. After several excruciating moments, he swung the rifle to rest against his shoulder, then turned and headed toward his horse. He waved his hand vaguely.

"Get on with you. You're wasting my time, and I've work to do."

Jessie snorted. "Work? You're not a local. You must be far from your fields, mister."

He shoved the rifle into his carrier and had the reins in his hands when he turned. "Ain't no farmer, kid, though by the looks of things around here you could use a few."

She forced herself to take a step closer. "If you're not a farmer, what are you?"

"Lay off," the man said. "Questions can get you in trouble in these times."

He foraged in a saddle bag. Jessie's gaze roamed once again over his strong, muscled shoulders, the broad back. A quick vision of the bulge in those tight trousers flashed through her mind. She gulped, so glad he hadn't seen it. She cleared her throat, but her words still came out too soft, almost a murmur. "Whatever you are, it's no good. I can feel it"

"Probably not," he said, turning. "Here."

He tossed a small package at her and she had to lunge to catch it, dipping low to the ground. When she stood, his mouth twitched in what could have been a smile, but in a man like this, she had her doubts. She ran her fingers over the cloth and glanced up, puzzled.

"Rock candies," he said. "Got them in the last town. Share them with the boy."

Martin rushed out of the bushes and ran toward them. He grabbed the cloth from her hand, clawing at the string. "Thanks, mister."

"No problem," he said.

Martin stuffed a candy into his mouth, moaning. His eyes rolled back in his head like he'd never had candy before. Jessie agreed they looked tempting. Her mouth watered. It had been a long time since she'd seen candy. She stepped forward and tilted her head as she once again took in every inch of that body—a body that might work quite well in intimidating a certain piece of scum she knew. That body would probably work well in other things as well, but she refused to think of that. Every time her thoughts went in that direction, that heat consumed her face and irritation swelled through her, making her antsy and nervous, and she didn't like the way her breathing changed.

"Tell me what you do," she said.

"No."

"I'd like to hire you."

Martin nodded enthusiastically.

He glanced at Martin, who still moaned and could obviously be bought with candy. She didn't think she'd be so lucky with this man. If he gave away candy to strangers, he probably couldn't be bought.

The man grunted and flung his arm over the saddle. "You boys are clearly in no position to hire anyone."

Some muffled words flew out of Martin's mouth. She stomped on his foot to shut him up, then caught his shoulders and spun him around. "Back to the wagon and save some of that candy for later, you glutton. Leave the business transactions to me."

She pivoted and caught the man staring at her bottom. Somehow she knew she hadn't fooled him. A man like this couldn't be fooled. She blushed furiously and struggled to gain control of herself. His gaze slowly lifted to her face.

"I'm not cheap," he said. "I get paid in gold for what I do."

"Not many people get paid in gold these days."

In that moment it hit her. She knew exactly what he was. She sighed, closing her eyes for a moment in defeat. She doubted her luck could get worse today. She suspected this man was her worst nightmare. His snooping around the back roads proved it. With his strong, broad shoulders, hands that seemed large enough to handle the biggest problems and that stern face set in an expression that would brook no interference from anyone, this man would be capable of withstanding the most fervent pleas.

Her shoulders slumped. "You're a bounty hunter."

One brow rose. "What would a kid like you know about bounty hunters?"

"I know enough. Is that what you are?"

He nodded curtly, a lock of dark hair falling across his brow. It softened the harshness of his face and made him almost human. But this man couldn't possibly be human doing the things he did.

* * * *

The little she-man put her hands on her hips. "I should have known. A man like you, in a place like this. Damn it. I could use your skills, and I could certainly use your," her gaze swept down his body once again and she flushed a pretty shade of pink, "strength. But I don't have gold, mister. I barely have enough food to get us through the day. And you've seen the way he eats." She tossed a glance over her shoulder.

Damn if she wasn't the cutest thing he'd seen in a long time. In his line of work, falling for cute got you a mess of grief. He'd found that out down in Lexington when he'd discovered Billy trussed up like a holiday goose and his pockets empty.

"Then we're done here." He had put his foot in the stirrup when he felt a brush of wind and a small, strong hand grabbed the back of his shirt. He dropped his head back and groaned. "You're like a mosquito."

She huffed. "Can you just listen for a minute?"

He swung into the saddle. "Why would I do that? You've already said you have no way to pay. Do I look like a philanthropist to you?"

"No."

Her quick response would have hurt his feelings if he had any left, but as it was, he figured she'd probably judged correctly on appearances. He cocked his head and peered at her.

"So, why should I listen?"

She rolled her gorgeous green eyes, a very feminine gesture, and she seemed totally unaware she had betrayed her cover several times now. "Because I've asked." He almost smiled when her rosy lips pursed in a pout, a very kissable pout that stirred his cock again. This little chit was no actress. She seemed to have no self-awareness at all. By her huffy little cocksure attitude, she'd also made it obvious she got her own way most, if not all, of the time. He wasn't surprised—probably had a doting father somewhere on these back roads struggling to keep his farm alive. She continued to look at him like he wore a sign that said Village Idiot. The fact that he hadn't moved on and left her standing on the side of this so-called road signaled that he probably should be wearing that sign. But something about her made him stay there.

"You're not as much in the way of asking, boy, as telling. I don't relish taking orders from a pint-sized runt playing at being a man."

She straightened her shoulders. "I don't need your opinions. I need your help."

"Sorry for your luck, boy, but I don't take risks for nothing."

* * * *

The bounty hunter's head snapped around at the sound of horse's hooves. Another rider appeared around the bend in the road, traveling at a breakneck speed, and on this road, breaking his neck was a real possibility. The dark man leapt from the horse, grabbed her arm and flung her aside as the horse careened to a stop, pawing at the ground. Jessie landed on her bottom with a thud, her teeth snapping together, and fell backwards.

The man on the approaching horse hadn't noticed her yet. He swung down and moved toward the bigger man, talking the whole time. "A couple days, Cutter. About five miles south of here. Should be about eight or so. Highly reliable information and—"

His head swiveled around. She lurched back when she saw the man's face. A huge jagged scar scoured the side of his face from his forehead to chin. The wound had sealed one eye closed and twisted his mouth into a permanent sneer. His wild auburn hair tumbled over

his head and curled around his neck, sweeping into the heavy sideburns that grew across his cheeks. He took several steps toward her, leaning down very close to her face. Jessie drew back.

"Oh, you're a pretty boy, you are," the man said. The sneer on his mouth tried to lift into a smile. "Look at those eyes you got there. Shining like diamonds. No, wait." He paused and glanced over a lopsided shoulder. "Raines, what do you call those gemstones? You know, the green ones?"

The dark man's eyes met hers, and she twisted uncomfortably. "Emeralds, Billy. They're called emeralds."

The man-called-Billy leaned even closer, and the smell of alcohol wafted over her. His grimy fingers gripped her chin, turning her face left, then right.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Emeralds. Bright, shining emeralds. I know a man in Cincinnati that would fall hard for you, boy. Oh, yes, you're just the kind of lad Sheffield likes."

Her dark hero suddenly seized the man's hand and lowered his arm. "Lay off, Billy. We're not whoremasters. Sheffield can get his own boys. Besides, he doesn't pay near enough."

Billy's good eye rolled in its socket, and he swiveled his head toward her savior. "Ah, come on, Raines. We could make a pretty penny on this one. All it would take is a quick trip across the river, a knock on the door and we'd—"

The man growled a low warning his throat. "I said lay off. I know the kind of boy Sheffield likes, and this isn't it."

Jessie scrambled to her feet and backed up, colliding with the dark man's horse. The animal snorted, nudged her away and went back to chewing on a piece of bark. Billy's eye sparkled with something that scared her a little, and the idea of being forced to Cincinnati to meet a man named Sheffield suddenly terrified her. She thought of Martin, blissfully consuming his candies—Martin, who was a boy and just might be Sheffield's type.

She straightened her spine and met Billy's one glittering eye. "We won't be going to Cincinnati, um, Billy, so your Mr. Sheffield will have to be disappointed. It's impossible actually. I've hired this man to do a job for me." She nodded at her dark hero.

"You have?" the dark man asked.

"Yes, I have." She pivoted on her heel, colliding with him. Cutter Raines? Raines Cutter? What kind of name was that? It didn't matter what he called himself. One touch of his hard body sent a shockwave through her, and she scurried backwards. Her skin sizzled as heat flared through her from the tips of her toes to her face, which seemed to burst into flame. She struggled to find any words. "We just haven't agreed to the terms yet."

"Would take a lot—"

She pulled the hat from her head, and her hair tumbled around her shoulders. Immediate relief descended over her as the dark veil hid the side of her face from Billy's stare, but the look Raines gave her made a whole new level of discomfort surge through her. Frank had never looked at her that way. Cutter Raines-Raines Cutter's deep blue eyes darkened to midnight and shone with a gleam of light she could only associate with the eyes of a bobcat intent on raiding the hen house. Her hand tightened on the butt of the pistol, but she suddenly knew she'd never have the strength or desire to use it on this man. No, this man offered too much promise for that.

He thrilled her and scared her at the same time. The fear roiling in her gut was familiar. She'd had a reasonably safe life, but fear paid a visit in this part of the country every day in one form or another—predators, weather, outlaws and, lately, soldiers on both sides of the new conflict. Each day brought a new challenge and new anxieties. Even acquaintances brought fear. Nathaniel Prentice flickered through her mind.

She could deal with the fear. But that thrill? Her blood seemed to course through her veins with lightning speed, growing hotter and hotter as she struggled for breath.

Raines reached out and lifted a lock of hair from her shoulder. His fingers rubbed the texture as his gaze roamed across her chest. Finally he lifted his eyes to hers, staring from the dark shadows of his brows. "This has suddenly taken an interesting turn. And what might your terms be, girl?"

Her mouth dried up like the riverbanks in a bad season. Her words stuck to the roof of her mouth. She forced them out, nearly choking. "I think I can make them worth your while."

His hand swept under her hair and tugged her closer. His fingers burned against her skin. She squirmed under the light caressing touch. She didn't know if she wanted to draw away or push herself directly into his arms.

Billy sidled closer. She couldn't find the nerve to look at him, but heard him take a deep raspy breath, then choke and spit something onto the ground. She shuddered and refused to look at whatever horrible thing he had dislodged. The aroma of sweaty, liquor-soaked skin nearly overwhelmed her and made her want to puke. But the feel of those fingers on her neck would be her undoing. They coiled something in her gut, twisting lower and lower and moisture leaked from her body. That couldn't be good at all.

"She smells pretty, Raines."

"Indeed she does." A smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

She cleared her throat and drew back a step. His hand followed the line of her body, down her shoulder blades, across her breast, until distance separated them. She tugged on her jacket, trying to find some level of respectability. Respectability had flown away somewhere further down the road, perhaps in the destruction of her father's house. More likely it had vanished when she stepped out of the bushes and saw this man.

He's not good for you. Get in the wagon.

She didn't move. She couldn't move. Her feet seemed stuck in quicksand. She'd heard of quicksand, and the thought terrified her—being pulled inexorably toward an unknown with no escape, no help

of any kind. Her father had scolded her for that irrational fear, telling her quicksand did not exist in the glorious state of Kentucky. But now she knew why she shuddered when she heard the word. Kentucky held quicksand of a different type. One look at this man told her that.

"So, about those terms?" the man said.

Her mind whirled. Martin had coins. No, no, they'd need those. She had no idea what troubles they might find, and she doubted anyone would hand Jane and the others back to her because she had a slip of crumpled paper. This man worked for gold. With his size, his stern demeanor and that hint of violence smoldering beneath the surface, he seemed worth any amount of gold to get a job done. Besides gold, what might entice this man to help her? She could think of only one thing. No, no, she couldn't do—

He rubbed the back of his fingers over his jaw and that simple sound caused the moisture to leak from her privates again. Her knees threatened to buckle as his stare wandered down her body. He might do it. Would it be so bad? She almost sighed with the thought and wanted someone to kick her in the ass.

She wished she wore a dress and hoped she looked enticing enough to be worth this man's time, or at least presentable enough. His eyes seemed to say she did. She couldn't believe what she was about to say, but desperate people did desperate things. Despite her bravado with Ellie, she couldn't handle Prentice on her own. She squared her shoulders and shook off what remained of the respectable widow. She stepped into the quicksand and fell into the abyss of this man's dark cloud.

"I'm willing to offer myself. For however long it takes to do the job."

Raines cocked his head. "For what exactly? Billy does the cooking."

"Yeah, I do the—"

Raines held up his hand, and Billy shut up.

"For whatever, well, whatever your needs are," Jessie stammered.

"Ah," Raines said. He tilted his head back and stared at the darkening sky. "You couldn't begin to understand my needs. I'm a rather complicated man. Dissecting my needs has become the hobby of professionals and—"

"Mr. Raines, are you being dense on purpose?"

For one moment a flash of horror swept through her at her own temerity and arrogance. Why would this man even be interested in her terms? Her gaze roamed down that hard, muscled body, over that handsome if somewhat dangerous-looking face. This man could have any woman he wanted and probably had.

Raines studied her closely, the dark shadow of his hat moving across his face like a coming storm. When he raised his eyes back to hers, she knew his thoughts and her body shuddered against her will. She had ventured into unknown territory and there was no way she'd come out unscathed. What brewed in this man could tear her world apart.

"Are we talking about fucking? If so, I think we can do some business."

She controlled the gasp threatening to tear from her mouth. She might have been thinking of that, but to have it stated so bluntly made her wonder when she'd lost her mind. She steeled herself and stepped out of the frying pan and into the fire. "Yes, that's what I'm talking about."

"We have a deal then, Miss...?" His brow rose.

"It's missus. Mrs. Jessie McGee."

His dark brows drew down in a frown. He shook his head as though to clear a disturbing thought and glanced at Billy.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head again. "No deal. I don't fuck married women. My life has trouble enough."

"I'm a widow, Mr. Raines, so you'll have nothing to worry about. My husband won't be crawling from his grave any time soon." He glanced at Billy again. She curbed her impatience, clenching her fists against her legs and forcing her feet to stay where they were. Some look passed between them that she didn't understand. Raines rubbed a hand across his mouth and seemed to consider for a moment. He stuck out his hand. She stared at it stupidly then raised her own. He enveloped hers in a sure, strong grip. He turned to Billy as the other man dropped his hand over theirs and squeezed.

"Well, my friend," Raines said, "our comfort level just increased."

A huge twisted smile formed on Billy's face. Jessie's heart stopped. She glanced between the two men, desperate to find some hint of a joke. She yanked her hand away. "What?"

Raines clapped Billy on his lopsided shoulder. "Billy and I live a hard, sometimes lonely, life. We share everything, don't we, Billy?"

"That we do, Cutter." He lurched closer to her and gripped a lock of her hair, bringing it to his runny nose. His eye winked at her. "This is gonna be fun."

"Oh, dear God," Jessie squeaked.

Chapter 3

She'd managed to put some distance between them, but only because the two men lollygagged on the road, apparently having some great matters to discuss. Ha! Great matters? Billy's poor mind could hardly handle small matters, let alone great ones.

Martin leaned forward from the back of the wagon. She glanced behind her to see a very big scowl on his young face. Despite his age, the look still held reprimand. "You did what?" he whispered furiously.

"I didn't really have a choice," she muttered.

"We have money, Jessie! I offered the money."

"We need to save that. We might have trouble getting Jane back and I might need to bribe some people. Besides, Ellie threatened to turn me in. I can't exactly go home right now. Not until I have some of this mess cleared up. We might have to hide out somewhere. Oh dear God, I can't hide! I have to get home. Rob would never forgive me. I can't put him in—"

Damn it, Jessie, stop babbling. Martin's not stupid, you know.

"What are you talking about? What's Rob got to do with anything? He'll be fine." He clambered over the wagon seat and plopped down beside her. "Open."

She opened her mouth, and he dropped a butterscotch-flavored delight onto her tongue. She moaned and tried to form words around the hard candy but it came out as, "Wanks for waving me wome." She tucked the candy in the corner of her cheek where she could savor it. Butterscotch made everything right in her world. Always had.

Martin frowned. "Well, you deserve a couple pieces for what you're about to do. I know you've been married, Jessie, but this seems a little..." He ducked his head. "Not sure, but something."

"I'll be fine. It's just sex. They seem okay. Billy's a little scary looking and kind of," she heard Billy spit behind her, "disgusting, but I'll close my eyes. He'll probably be so excited he won't last long. I hope."

"You're the expert," Martin said, then shook his head. "Apparently. A whole two weeks of sex before your husband went off and got himself killed."

She smirked. "It wasn't exactly the whole two weeks, more like a couple of times. Farming's hard work, very tiring. Frank usually fell right asleep."

Martin dropped his head into his hands. "Oh, jeez, Jessie. This can't be good. You've only had sex a couple times? Are you even going to know what to do?"

"Good Lord, Marty, we lived on a farm! Of course I know what to do."

Martin laughed. "Have a feeling it's different between people. And these men, they aren't exactly farmers. Frank could have at least taught you something before leaping feet first into his grave."

She patted his knee. "Don't blame Frank for dying on me. He followed his heart. Had I been a man I would have been with him. It's a good fight, Marty, and one I believe in. One Frank believed in." She turned and tucked her finger under his chin. "But I'm glad you're still young. I don't want you marching off to war and leaving me behind."

"Well, I—"

"What you two gabbin' about over there?"

Billy's voice caused a slight shudder to shake her shoulders but she turned to him with the brightest smile she could muster. "Talking about these delicious candies."

Billy smiled his leering grin and tugged at his groin. "I've got something delicious for you, Jessie girl."

Martin lurched across her lap, nearly spilling out of the seat, and digging the hard points of his elbows into her thighs. "Watch your mouth, mister. She may have agreed to this, but you got no cause to talk to her that way."

Billy cocked his head. "Quite the little Galahad, aren't you, boy? I admire that in a pint your size. You could go far. Maybe we'll talk in a couple years." He spurred his horse and galloped off down the path.

Martin plopped back in his seat as another voice, this one husky and smooth, invaded their privacy.

"He's going ahead to find us a suitable campsite for the night."

Jessie raked sweaty hair from her forehead. "Good. I'm exhausted. This has not been my best day."

"We'll see what we can do about that later," Raines said. His gaze swept down her body. "I'm pretty sure I can come up with something."

Martin grunted. "I'll bet."

Raines gave Martin a quizzical look then swung his glance back toward her. "You told him?"

"It's going to be hard to keep secret, Mr. Raines. Marty's not happy about it, but he understands our immediate problem." She straightened in her seat. "I think he's hoping you have more sweetmeats in those sacks of yours."

"Got plenty of stuff in my sacks," he said.

He waggled his brows and Martin laughed. She twisted her face between them and finally sighed. "Keep your funny stuff to yourself if it's at my expense."

They both burst into laughter and Raines stuck his heels in the horse's flanks and shot away down the path.

Jessie fanned her face. "What an odd man."

Martin nodded. "I kind of like him."

"You would."

* * * *

The campfire glowed softly, throwing up showers of sparks as Billy stirred some sludge in a rusted pan on a grate. Flecks of decayed iron occasionally drifted into the brew inside. Jessie couldn't wait to get the taste of metal scrapings in her mouth, another thing to look forward to in this endless day of miserable events. As the grease from the pan sparked, leapt out and sizzled into the fire, a heavenly smell drifted around her. The aroma roused the hunger pangs growling in her stomach, and she suddenly didn't care about a hunk or two of metal. Martin dozed against her shoulder but sat upright when the smell reached him.

"What you cooking, Billy?" he asked.

"A little of this, little of that. Can't be picky on the road. But should fill your belly there, Marty."

He grabbed a couple of big leaves from a pile near the fire and started to ladle some sort of meaty concoction onto the vegetation. He lurched across the distance, his bad shoulder rolling with his effort. Jessie gulped. Every movement Billy made seemed to create a new deformity. She wondered how she'd make it through the night and keep the food down. Martin thrust out his hands, licking his lips, as Billy handed over supper.

"Cutter and I travel light. Watch it, 'cause it's hot. You'll have to kind of slurp it up. We don't do a whole lot of elegant dining on the road."

Martin took a whiff. His tongue peeked out to swipe at the dark mass. "Mmm. Beef. Haven't had beef in a long time. Really good. Thanks, Billy."

"Sure thing." He ladled some more and handed the meat packet to Jessie, then winked at her. "Don't eat too much, girlie. Don't want you falling asleep on me later."

"No, we wouldn't want that," Jessie muttered.

The shadow of the firelight shifted as Raines entered the clearing from the woods. His dark body seemed to take up too much space,

and Jessie squirmed in her seat, aware of how much sweat must linger on her. She tucked her head down and sniffed her armpits, almost spilling her dinner in her lap. If sex with this man was on the agenda, she wanted to at least be clean. He might be a no-good bounty hunter—which made him a despicable human being in Jessie's estimation—but as far as bodies went, Raines had a fine one. She eyed him across the fire. He looked refreshed, his damp hair slicked back from his forehead. He'd been bathing somewhere and had even run a razor across his face. She cast a glance at Billy and sincerely hoped he had the same idea.

Raines dropped two canteens of water, a sliver of harsh soap and a small rag on the log where she sat. "For cleaning up after supper." He took his makeshift plate from Billy and hunkered down on the ground, leaning against a tree. He nodded at the wagon and horses. "Figure maybe Marty can bunk in the wagon. He'll be okay. The horses will sound off if something's wrong. That work for you?" He shifted his glance to her.

She nodded curtly and went back to slurping her dinner, feeling a bit like a pig at a trough. If the evening could get any more uncomfortable, she wasn't sure how.

"And, Billy, wouldn't hurt you to clean some of that filth off you," Raines said.

"Sure thing, Cutter. Wouldn't want to offend the little girl. Want to make this as much fun as possible."

Billy's good eye winked. That did it. Her comfort level dropped down into some deep, dark well, and she fell in willingly.

"I'm still here," Martin said. "I'd prefer not to hear about any of this."

Billy laughed. "No sweat, boy." He sniffed his armpit with a mighty whiff. "Well, maybe a little sweat."

Jessie groaned and ran a hand over her eyes. They ate in merciful silence for a few minutes until Billy let out a huge belch and wandered off in the direction of the trees. She hoped he got lost in the

woods, preferably for the whole night, but since this wasn't her best day, she doubted she'd be that lucky. Martin gave an incredibly large yawn and took a swig of water from the canteen. He stood up and stretched.

"Since I'm not involved in all this, I'm not cleaning up. I'm going to sleep." He leaned down and kissed Jessie's cheek, whispering in her ear. "I'll load the pistol just in case. If you need me, holler. Don't be braver than you have to be."

She nodded, overwhelmed by the look on his face. Her little brother had grown up, and she was both sorry and proud to see it. He gave her another kiss, straightened, and cast a stern look at Raines.

"You treat her right."

"Not to worry, boy. I treat all my ladies right. Never had a complaint."

Martin looked ambivalent for a moment, his glance darting between the two of them. His hands curled at his sides. Jessie knew he thought about putting his foot down and stopping this insane bargain.

She took his hand. "I'll be fine, Marty. Really. Save me some room in the wagon. And don't hog the blanket."

"Sure, Jessie." He backed up a few steps then turned and practically ran toward the wagon.

Jessie picked up the canteen, soap and rag. "I'll be right back."

Raines nodded, and she fled the light of the campfire before he could see the blush staining her face.

* * * *

Billy dropped down to the grass beside Raines, combing through his damp hair with his fingers, twisting the strands into an unruly mop of choppy spikes. He patted the ends. It felt about right, but without a mirror he couldn't be sure. Probably didn't matter in the dark.

"Funny thing having the bait drop into our lap."

"Might be too funny," Raines said. "Something suspicious about it, but I'll wait and see."

"Couldn't really do a whole lot. But I don't stink." He sniffed under his armpits. "At least I don't think I do. Do I?" He shoved his armpit toward Raines' face.

He smiled when Raines cast a glance toward the darkening woods. He had something on his mind, which wasn't surprising because the man thought more than any man Billy had ever known.

"Probably should have given her the lantern," Raines said. "She might get lost out there. Or possibly re-think this idea and make a run for it."

Billy laid back and tucked his hands under his head. "Nah, she's not going to leave the squirt. What's this job she hired for you anyway? She doesn't look like she needs a bounty hunter. I'd be willing to bet she could do her own tracking, and I sure wouldn't want her riled at me. She's a feisty little thing. Cute as hell if you ask me."

"Didn't ask you," Raines said.

Billy laughed and sat up, wrapping his arms around his knees. "No, you don't do a whole lot of asking, Cutter. That's one of the things I like about you. This is going to complicate things for us, you know. Helping the bait? Not exactly a situation we've been in before. We don't even fucking know what side of the fence she's on, or whether she's chosen any direction at all. No matter what we do here, we might be in a world of hurt. She seems smarter than hell."

"That kid is no simpleton either."

Billy glanced at his friend. "She gets a little rattled by you, but I think she might like me. Don't ya think?" When a slight smile curved across Raines' mouth, Billy continued. "What do ya think she likes better? The rolling lurch, the crooked shoulder, or the beauty mark on my face?"

"Gotta be the boozy smell, Billy. Turns women to mush. I've seen 'em swoon at your feet."

Billy nodded. "Can't ever smell like enough booze if you ask me—which of course you didn't. So we're taking this job though we don't know a thing about her besides the fact she's the mark. She might slit our throats while we sleep, no matter which side she thinks we're on. She could also turn us over to whatever army comes marching through here next."

"Thought of all that."

"And we're still going to help her. Is that the way of it?"

"Seems that way."

"Getting that heart back, Cutter? Might want to watch that."

Raines threw him a disgusted look. "Not much chance of that."

Billy didn't care how many disgusted looks he had to bear. He knew deep down there was more to the man beside him than he showed to the world. Someone had to force the demons out of him. Seemed the lot fell to him and Billy didn't mind at all. Forcing Cutter back to the world of the living gave him something to concentrate on besides the thoughts rolling through his own head. He hadn't had much luck yet getting Cutter to talk, but some day his luck would change. In the meantime, he simply enjoyed the man's company and kept the leash tight.

"Well, if some pretty little hussy plans to castrate me tonight, I'd like an idea why."

"Don't know yet," Raines said. "Plan to save the interrogation for after the fucking. At least we get a little something out of it. And she might get a little something out of it too. She's intense."

"And cute as hell."

"Knock it off, Billy."

"Well, I sure hope she plans to castrate you first, so I get a little warning. I'm rather fond of my balls. She's sure to go after you first. I mean, who wouldn't? I'm much nicer. And better looking."

Raines ran his hand over his jaw. "She had a Union pistol."

"Wouldn't be hard to get your hands on a Union pistol no matter which side you fall on. They're scattered all over this state—easy

pickings. And from what we've seen, people change their attitude in the blink of an eye. Kentucky loyalty depends on the way the wind's blowing. Hell, Cutter, even the government can't make up its mind. Each time Morgan raids a town, someone changes their vote. Christ, we saw it in Lexington when he came through. They practically spread palm branches for him."

"Morgan's a hero to these people. Everyone needs a hero," Raines said.

"I sure wish the government in Washington would get off their asses and create one for us."

"Would help," Raines said. "But it's been pretty quiet lately. Think things are winding down here. Might make our job easier."

"Nothing's going to make our job easier. No matter what happens here, the south isn't going to hand over their livelihood. If this goes according to the plan Lincoln's laid out, there are harder times coming. And our lives will get harder with them. I sure would like to see it all work though. Not keen on people being owned by others."

"I never have been." Raines suddenly chuckled. Billy glanced at him sideways. "Sheffield, Billy? Cyrus Sheffield is the biggest womanizer I know—including you."

"First name that popped into my head. Wanted to toy with her a little. Wouldn't want her to get the upper hand."

"Can't wait to tell Cyrus that story."

* * * *

When she plodded back into the clearing, she felt reasonably clean and far less sweaty, but froze when she saw Billy and Raines whispering with their heads together. They stopped talking as soon as her shadow fell over them. Billy jumped to his feet and rubbed his hands together.

"So, we ready for this?"

She laid her jacket down on the log and glanced around in the flickering light. They'd spread blankets under some trees as far away from the wagon as the clearing allowed. She tossed her hair back and squared her shoulders. She could do this. She knew she could. It was just sex. People had sex all the time. She might be a little inexperienced, but one man had to be the same as another in the dark. Billy could be the possible exception, but she refused to think of that.

Raines rose to his feet, and she fell into that dark, deep well again. The muscles of her privates clenched which seemed very odd because that had never happened around Frank. Her heart pounded so hard in her chest, she knew he must hear it. He could probably smell the fear that poured from her in waves. The small smile playing on his mouth let her know he did. He pushed Billy forward.

"It's been a while, Billy. You go first."

"Thanks, Cutter. It *has* been a while. I feel like I could go all night with someone this pretty."

His hand wrapped around hers and his eye blazed with something she couldn't fathom. Dizziness caught her off guard, and she stumbled when he dragged her against him. She smashed into his body, and a choked sound came from her mouth. His hands roamed up her back, hot and impatient through the fabric of her dress. The idea of those hands touching her bare flesh filled her with something she couldn't even name. Her body shuddered and she stared into his face, hoping she managed to keep the disgust blazing through her from showing in her expression. His head tilted toward her, and he pursed his lips. She squinched her eyes closed and swayed as her mind refused to think any further.

Suddenly, his arms dropped, and her eyes flew open. He bent double and burst into howling laughter. He laughed so hard he fell on his ass and curled into a ball, holding his stomach and howling at the moon like a demented wolf.

"Did you see her face?" Billy sputtered between bursts of laughter.

Her glance darted furiously between the two men, trying desperately to figure out how this horrible charade had turned into a demented fiasco. Raines laughed now too, and she felt as though that dark well had pitched further into some deeper level of hell.

"What is wrong with you two?" she asked. "I just got dizzy, that's all."

Billy roared again, rolling on the ground like a man in the middle of a fit. She'd seen that once, and the man had laughed himself into a quiet stupor. They'd carted him off, and she'd never seen him again. She heard they sent him to a mental institution in Cincinnati, and people that went there never came out.

Billy finally sat up, wiping tears from his face. "I just can't do it to her."

"I'm perfectly willing," Jessie said. "I always fulfill my bargains." Billy stood and started clawing at his face, his fingers sinking into the flesh with a sickening squish.

"No! Stop that!" Jessie cried. "You'll end up in Cincinnati!"

She reached out to yank his hand away and with it came a hunk of flesh that hung in her hand like discarded serpent's skin. Her stomach lurched. She flapped her arms, screeching, until her fingers finally released it. She covered her face with her hands, chanting furiously, "this can't be happening," over and over until a hand touched hers and tugged.

"Look at me, darlin'."

She peeked through her fingers and met Billy's eyes. His eyes? Two perfectly formed, beautiful brown eyes stared at her. Her hands slid down her face. She gaped as Billy smiled with perfect lips and started to peel the sideburns from his face.

"It's a disguise, darlin'," he said. "A damn sight better than the one you were wearing. Boy, my ass. I can teach you to do much better than that."

Jessie felt that dizzy feeling descending again and sank with oblivion into the soft wet mass of the quicksand.

* * * *

When she came to, she felt the rough blanket beneath her hands. A small lantern cast an eerie flickering glow over two sets of beautiful eyes staring at her with concern—one set blue, the other brown. She struggled to sit up, and two sets of hands gathered around her shoulder and back and lifted gently.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You fainted dead away," Billy said. "Might have been the fake skin. Too much for you?"

"I've never fainted in my entire life."

Raines rubbed a warm hand over her back. "You can't say that any more, Mrs. McGee."

"Just Jessie, please. Mrs. McGee is a different woman." She glanced toward the wagon. "Is Martin okay? Did I scare him?"

"He's fast asleep," Billy said. "I checked on him."

"Some guard," Jessie muttered.

She glanced between the two men then reached up to touch Billy's face. An angry rose-colored stain marked his skin but otherwise his face was unscarred, thoroughly pleasing and smooth shaven except for some auburn stubble on his jaw. Her fingers lingered near his mouth where the rosy bruise met the color of his lips. "I'm very confused."

Billy smiled and winked at her. "Not as ugly as you thought?"

She shook her head. "Maybe you can explain it to me later when I've crawled out of the well."

Billy caught her hand and dropped a quick kiss on her palm. "Gotta keep our secrets. We'd best get you to the wagon."

Raines scooped his arm under her knees and prepared to stand. She held up her hand. "No, wait."

He lowered her back to the blanket. "Are you going to be sick?"

She took a deep cleansing breath. "No, I'm feeling surprisingly fine."

The men glanced at one another as her fingers toyed with the buttons of her shirt. She lowered the suspenders and pulled them off her shoulders. She slowly undid the first button and moved on to the second. When she reached the third, she undid it quickly before she could change her mind. She snatched the shirt over her head, and when the cool air touched her skin, her nipples pebbled into hard stones. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders and across her chest, allowing her a moment's respite, but not before a low groan came from one of the men. She couldn't tell which one, but she suspected it was Billy. Her suspicions were confirmed when he said, "This is going to kill me."

"Make that both of us," Raines said.

"You don't need to do this tonight," Billy said, then shrugged. "Or ever, really."

"Yes, I do."

She lay back on the blanket to take care of the buttons on her trousers. As her hands moved downward, they were intercepted by long, slender fingers as Billy said, "Let me." Raines removed her boots and stockings, and when the buttons were open, slid the pants down her legs.

"I'm kind of glad it's so dark," Billy said. "Not sure I could take it otherwise. Jessie, I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Raines chuckled. "And he's seen a lot."

Jessie smiled. "That makes one of us. I don't have a lot of experience in these matters, gentlemen, so I'm offering myself to your expertise. You just tell me what you want."

"We'll worry about us some other time," Raines said. "Close your eyes."

It was the last thing she expected him to say. Her eyes widened, and he reached out, his fingertips sliding against her lids with a soft caress. She took a deep breath and waited. A single finger touched her jaw then slid down the side of her throat causing a shiver to run through her entire body. It moved lower, over the mound of her breast, across the tight nipple, to trail across her stomach. When it was gone, she missed it.

A hand enveloped her foot, and strong thumbs kneaded the arch, moving over the bottom of her foot with a steady, rhythmic pace. Jessie moaned at the incredible sensations that flooded through her. She had no idea anything could feel that good. The hand worked its way up her calf muscles to her knee then moved to her other leg. While the hand massaged her other foot, she groaned and felt the light touch of lips on hers. As quickly as it came, it vanished.

A rough hand cupped her breast with a soft pressure, and a thumb flicked across her nipple. As she tried to concentrate on that incredible sensation, a set of fingers touched her thigh and gently squeezed the muscles, moving from her knees upward. Heat coiled somewhere low and deep inside her and seemed to burn a trail of fire down to meet the fingers. She waited eagerly as they moved slowly, inch by agonizing inch, the thumbs moving in ever-expanding circles higher and higher. She lifted her hips slightly but had no idea why.

Another set of lips touched hers and this time lingered longer. She opened her mouth slightly and the pressure increased, the lips covering hers completely. She lifted her face higher and returned the kiss, drawing the bottom lip into her mouth and sucking until she heard a low growl. Raines. The pressure on her breast tightened, squeezing, and she arched her back.

The hands on her thighs moved higher and pushed slightly. Jessie opened her thighs wider and waited for the feel of a hard body against hers. Instead two thumbs moved toward her center, sliding down the flesh with the soft touch of a butterfly. Jessie shivered. The thumbs moved upward into the mound of hair and circled slowly downward. An itchy anticipation coursed through her body, and she wiggled

slightly, willing the thumbs to move further. She heard a soft chuckle. Billy.

The kiss had deepened and a hand cupped her face, drawing her closer. A tongue swept between her lips and plundered the inside of her mouth at the same time Billy's thumb found a spot that forced her hips off the blanket. Jessie gasped, trying to draw a breath but Raines increased the pressure of the kiss as Billy kneaded the spot with his thumb. A finger traced downward over her slit, and she felt the moisture that leaked from her. It smeared across her skin as Billy continued to circle his thumb on that excruciating spot and gently caressed the skin beneath. Her previously relaxed muscles clenched in response, and she could do nothing to control it. She tore her mouth away, moaning at the sensations flooding through her body.

"Oh dear God, Billy, what are you doing?"

"Your husband never touched your pussy?"

"My what? Oh no, we were always so tired and never—"

A finger slipped inside her body, and muscles she didn't even know she had gripped it tightly, refusing to let go. Raines' mouth enveloped her nipple, sucking on it with a pulsing rhythm that made her body throb while his fingers continued to knead her breast and his other hand curled around her back. She clutched the blanket as her back arched against the mouth and the fingers. Her body shook as a force moved through it, spiraling outward in consistent rings of sensation. Just when she thought she couldn't take another minute, Billy's finger began to move, sliding in and out with increasing pressure and speed. His thumb locked on that piece of flesh that seemed to have a will of its own and circled in a steady pace that would surely send her to Cincinnati.

"What are you touching now?" she gasped. How many spots on her body had never been touched before?

Billy blew softly against her hot skin. She shuddered. "It's your clit. Feels good, does it?"

"It feels incredible. Don't stop."

"Didn't plan to, darlin'."

She tried desperately not to moan, but the shivers ran rampant through her entire body, cascading through each muscle and nerve until every touch forced a sound from her mouth. Part of her wanted to crawl into Frank's grave and kick his ass. Farming be damned. If she'd known about any of this, she would have locked Frank in the house for the two weeks she had him. The other part of her wanted to become lost in these incredible waves of pleasure, but the rational part refused to forget the boy on the other side of the camp.

She reached up and cupped the back of Raines' head, pulling him down. "Kiss me."

His mouth swooped on hers in time to stop the scream that would surely wake the dead, or at least a sleeping boy. Billy's finger plunged into her hard, and the touch of his thumb forced a violent shudder to rack the entire length of her body. A cresting wave tore through her and finally crashed, leaving her breathless, trembling and burning every inch of her body. And when she thought it was over, Billy's thumb pressed against her, and her hips lifted off the blanket as Raines sucked her tongue into his mouth and drew on it until she collapsed back to the ground in a puddle.

Billy's hands softly stroked her skin, and Raines' mouth dropped soft kisses against her face. Jessie felt limp, exhausted and something else she couldn't possibly identify. It might be relaxed, but she'd never had a relaxed moment in her life.

Both men dropped to the blanket on either side of her.

Billy sighed. "I told you she would kill me."

Raines laughed. "I think she killed us both."

"Make that three of us," Jessie said. "You, gentlemen, have just given me the greatest gift of my life. I had no idea anything like that could ever happen. I think this is the best bargain I've ever made."

Raines gathered her in his arms, and Billy tugged a blanket over them. Jessie fell asleep more content than she'd ever been in her life.

Chapter 4

Jessie had found the perfect leaves, just like the ones Billy had used the night before. She untied the bundle and unpacked the food, humming a little tune while she prepared breakfast. In the valley below, the sun slipped over the horizon, sending blazes of dazzling light over the colorful boughs of the trees dotting the hills, and offered a glimpse of a beautiful day.

"Ellie sure did some damage to these biscuits."

"Gonna be kind of hard to spread anything on those," Martin said behind her. "Might have to sprinkle them in the jam."

She glanced over her shoulder and gave him a smile. "I'll manage."

Martin's jaw dropped. "Huh?" He cocked his head. "I've seen you throwing things for a lot less than messy biscuits. What's wrong with you today?"

"Absolutely nothing." She flipped the lid on the jar and used her finger to spread the jam on the crumbling biscuits. "Everything seems just about perfect." She dropped a hunk of cheese onto the leaf, added a little dried jerky and held it out. "Enjoy."

Martin gave her a funny look and shook the curls from his face. He plopped onto a bench and stuffed a piece of biscuit into his mouth, mumbling words as he chewed. "You're right about Ellie. She does make great jam."

"She also makes big problems. It seems to be her talent. But we'll get through this. As soon as we find Jane and the others, we'll go home and see what damage she's done to my reputation."

Martin cast a quick glance at the opposite side of camp. "About your reputation ..." He popped a piece of cheese into his mouth and ducked his head. "I kind of fell asleep."

Jessie put her head down. "I know. It's okay. Everything's fine, Marty. They were ... It was ... Everything's fine."

"Great, because I wondered how I'd handle it if I woke up to you crying. But you seem pretty good."

She gathered her breakfast and sat down. "I am good. For bounty hunters, they're both amazingly nice."

One of the men shifted and the blankets on the other side of the clearing rustled. Billy shook himself like a wet dog and walked toward them. When he saw the makeshift plates filled with breakfast, he offered a wide smile. "Starting out to be one glorious morning. After one glorious night." He gave Jessie a wink, and she turned her face before Martin could see the stain she felt burning her cheeks.

"Who the hell are you?" Martin asked. He studied him intently for a moment then his mouth dropped open. "Billy?"

Billy bowed with a flourish. "William Marlow at your service, young Galahad. Known and hailed on the stages of Boston, Philadelphia, New York and, most recently, Washington. Have had the finest reviews of any actor in our glorious land with the exception of John Wilkes Booth."

"I've heard of him," Martin said. "Supposed to be pretty good."

"Yes, well, he is, and I'm envious of his talent, but he's a bit eccentric if you ask me."

"You know him?"

Billy nodded. "I've worked with him, though he always manages top billing. Refuses to work otherwise. Has a big reputation and an even bigger ego. He's destined for immortality one way or another." Billy sighed. "It will probably be another. He's a bit rash and doesn't always make the best choices in his circle of friends."

Martin leaned forward eagerly, nearly spilling his breakfast. Jessie reached out and caught the leaf before it slid off his lap. Martin never

noticed. "If you've been to Washington, have you ever met President Lincoln?"

Billy nodded. "A great man and even greater friend."

Jessie's hand stopped mid-way to her mouth. She glanced at Billy from the corner of her eye. A bounty hunter who claimed Lincoln as a friend?

Martin sighed. "I hope to be a great man some day. Or at least a good man."

Billy winked. "You're on the right path, Galahad. Just stick to it and you'll be fine." He scooped some food into his mouth. "Oh, dear God, these are fabulous. Who made this jam?"

Still reeling from Billy's revelation, Jessie shook her head, trying to resolve the incongruous thought. "That would be our stepmother. Or, as I like to call her, Little Miss Bitchy."

A soft rumble of laughter drifted from behind her. Raines stepped over the log and sat down beside her, his hip brushing hers as he stretched out his long legs. A wave of heat passed through her, and she laughed, though she wasn't sure why. She glanced up to find him staring at her.

"I'd let a woman bitch at me night and day if she could cook like this," he said.

"Afraid I can't introduce you as I'm currently not on her list of favorite people. In fact—"

"Ellie's going to turn Jessie in to the authorities," Martin said.

The men exchanged glances, and Jessie tipped her head toward Martin, staring at him hard. "Because I broke some of her things. I have a rather nasty temper at times."

"Ha!" Martin said. "At times? Why just yesterday—" She kicked out and caught the side of his leg. He shut up and went back to eating.

"I'm inclined to agree with the kid," Raines said. "So, this job you've hired us for. Exactly what is it?"

"We're going after Jane," Martin said. He yanked his leg away as Jessie's foot shot out. "You might as well tell them, Jessie. How you gonna keep it secret? They gotta know what they have to do."

"Kid's right," Raines said. "If I need to kill someone for you, I need to know the why of it."

"Nobody's going to get killed!" Jessie cried.

"Wouldn't be so sure about that." Billy dipped his finger into the jar of jam, scooped out a huge dollop and plopped it into his mouth. He licked his lips and sighed blissfully. "Little Miss Bitchy sure can put up a jar of jam."

"No one is going to get killed," Jessie repeated. She swung her face between the men. Raines shoveled food into his mouth. Billy buried his nose in the jar, inhaling deeply.

"Cutter makes his own rules," Billy said. "If someone needs killing, they get killed. Why, just last week we met that hunter down—"

"Shut up, Billy," Raines growled.

Jessie stood up, leaving the warmth of Raines' body behind. She cocked her hip and stared down at him. "Well, *Cutter* is going to have to learn to control himself."

"Isn't possible," Billy said. "Even I can't stop him sometimes."

"Try harder, Billy," Jessie said. "If it's your damn job to keep him under control, do it, 'cause no one is going to get killed on my mission."

Raines licked his finger. "Mmm. Damn. How much of this stuff do you have?" Jessie huffed and held up one finger. Raines shook his head sadly. "Might have to do a raid."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Jessie said. "What do you have in mind?"

Raines drew back with a furrowed brow. "I was talking about the jam. Look, this isn't your mission. I took the job," he shook his head as though clearing out cobwebs, "apparently. And now it's my mission. So who's Jane?"

Jessie's hand fingered the edge of her pocket. She didn't want to talk about Jane, particularly that her father had been in love with Jane all these years. She still didn't understand how she couldn't have known that. She just wanted these men to follow her to Prentice, intimidate the hell out of him, and she could walk away with her best friend, no questions asked. They could part friends, and she, Martin and Jane could see what she could salvage from her old life. It seemed too risky to tell them how much Jane meant to her, how much she could be hurt if they chose to betray her. When she didn't answer, Raines leaned forward and stared at Martin.

Jessie jumped between them. "Jane's my property." Martin made a strangled noise, and she fluttered her hand at him, hoping he understood her signal, and kept his mouth shut. "You're bounty hunters. You can get her back for me. You have the authority."

"And you have the proof?" Raines asked. "'Cause it's hard to walk into a situation, demand the return of property and not have the proof. Generally I have the poster in my hand, or a bulletin from the paper, or a letter—"

"I have the proof," Jessie said. "I'll show it if it's necessary."

"Cutter's not the trusting sort," Billy said.

"Neither am I," Jessie said.

Raines stood and took a step toward her. She refused to back away and when his body brushed against hers, she struggled to control the shiver running down her spine. He leaned down and his warm breath stirred her hair as he whispered in her ear.

"You seemed trusting enough last night, Mrs. McGee."

"That was different," she whispered.

"So you'd trust a stranger with your body, but not your secrets?"

She took a step back and raised her face. "I could have cut off your manhood while you slept, and yet you slept like a baby."

"True enough. But you wouldn't want to do a thing like that, Mrs. McGee. My cock might come in handy tonight. In fact, I'm sure of it." When she gasped, he leaned down and brushed his lips across

hers. "Keep your secrets, for now. It's of no consequence to me. I'm always up for a little bit of mayhem."

"I prefer to keep the mayhem to a minimum."

He grabbed the jar of jam from Billy and dipped his finger inside. When he held it out to her, she opened her mouth, and her lips closed on his finger. She sucked the sweet concoction from his skin, her tongue swirling around his finger.

"Not going to be your call." Raines tugged his finger away. He turned and bent to pick up his breakfast.

"It *is* my call." She had a perfect view of his tight ass, flexing provocatively with his movement. Her hand reached out, and she snatched it back as she shook her head.

"That changed when you hired me. We do things my way. You'll adjust, or we'll end this little bargain now."

Jessie plunged her hands into her pockets, hiding her clenched fists, and stared at the ground. She hadn't felt in control since she'd ridden onto her pa's property, but showing that to anyone was not an option. Her world had spun into chaos when she viewed the devastation in her father's house, and each passing moment spun that chaos faster and faster. These men were not helping. This Mr. Raines offered his own brand of mayhem, and from the moment he'd ripped the gun from her hand, her control had slipped.

Ending the bargain seemed like a fine idea. Raines was arrogant and pig-headed, and she'd gain nothing from her association with him. She was pretty sure she'd fallen to his level, and pulling herself out of that quagmire would be tough enough without sliding further. She raised her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Raines interrupted.

"Exactly where are you leading us?"

"Leading you?"

"You were headed somewhere when we found you."

"Mr. Raines, you hardly found me. I know where I'm going. I was headed west. Jane was stolen by a man named Nathaniel Prentice.

Prentice is a wealthy man in this county, and I thought if you two just paid him a visit, he'd— What?" Both men had stopped chewing and stared at one another. Billy cleared his throat and began to pace around the clearing. Raines dropped his head and stared at his breakfast like he'd never seen food before. She huffed and put her hands on her hips. "What's wrong? Do you know Nathaniel?"

"Nathaniel, is it?" Raines asked.

"Well, he asked me to marry him once. Luckily I have a bit of common sense."

Raines rose, crumpling the leaf in his fist. He wouldn't meet her eyes and stared at Billy instead. "Mrs. McGee, I'm wondering about your common sense at this moment. It's probably best if you and Martin go home." Billy nodded his confirmation, his gaze briefly darting to hers.

She marched toward him. "No way in hell will we go home."

"Billy and I can find this woman, this Jane, and bring her back."

Jessie tilted her head. "There's actually more than one woman."

Raines' mouth dropped. "And when did you plan to share this information?"

"I just did."

Raines' jaw clenched. "How many?"

She waved her hand. "What's the difference if it's one or five?"

"Five! Goddamn—"

"Five is nothing in your business. It's the same job and the same bargain. I'm staying with you. I have some unfinished business with Nathaniel Prentice, and I intend to give him a piece of my mind."

"Not a good idea," Raines said.

She took a step closer and lifted her face to his. "When I need your opinion, I'll ask for it."

He gripped her arm and hauled her in the direction of the woods. When she dug in her heels, he leaned down, grabbed her thighs and hurled her over his shoulder. She kicked against him, but his arms tightened around her legs like bands of steel. Struggling stole her

breath, so she finally stopped. When he continued relentlessly into the woods, she screeched. He dumped her onto a pile of leaves, and she scrambled to her feet and launched herself at him. She came up hard against an immovable wall of rock.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You're supposed to be helping me."

Raines' fingers bit into her arm. "Tell me about Jane."

Jessie tried to shake him off, struggling under his hands, which hurt and inflamed something in her at the same time. It increased her irritation but her mind flashed back to the night before. Her eyes lingered on his mouth, remembering how it had captured her moans. She wanted to kiss those lips set in a hard, firm line. His fingers tightened, and her irritation resurfaced.

"What's to tell? I want her back. You're a bounty hunter. It's what you do. Track people down and return them. So do your damn job."

Raines gathered her face in his big hands and squeezed. "Don't be flippant with me. This is a serious business we're in. I'm trying to keep you alive. Do I have to ask Martin these questions?"

Jessie stilled. She dropped her eyes and tried to shake her head against the pressure of his hands. "No, don't involve Marty more than he already is."

He loosened his grip and his hands slid along her cheeks as he stepped back. "For whatever the reasons, we're in an alliance here. It doesn't matter where we stand. We'll fuck the consequences as we go. You have a problem. I have a job to do. But I need to know everything to do it right."

"I've told you everything. And I've given you a place to start."

"If Nathaniel Prentice is involved, this problem just got bigger, and I'll thank you later for dragging me into a darker corner of hell."

"I can't see the urgency, Raines. Nathaniel is a civilized man. And since we're acquainted, I should be able to talk with him reasonably and—"

"Ha!" Raines barked. "We've gone well beyond reasonable times here, Mrs. McGee. I'd say you've been a little sheltered if you think reason works on anyone anymore. This state is sitting smack in the middle of a powder keg just waiting for one side or the other to light the fuse. When that happens, everything is going straight to hell and taking all the reasonable people with it. It's a safe bet, though, your Nathaniel isn't one of them."

"I know what's going on in this state. I don't need a political tirade from you of all people. You're merely a mercenary taking full advantage of desperate times."

Raines rubbed the stubble on his throat with the back of his fingers. The rasping sound grated through her nerves as much as his words. "And a woman who takes advantage of that so-called mercenary's skills is more righteous in some way, Mrs. McGee?"

"The last thing I want to be is righteous. The moral high ground never helped anyone. In fact, it's sometimes dangerous. What we have here is not a case of political intrigue and falls outside the scope of righteousness. This is simply a financial situation. Nathaniel took my property for debt payment. If I get to him, I can find some way to repay it, and he'll give me back my property."

Raines folded his arms and peered down at her. A smile skimmed the corner of his mouth. "The same way you've paid us?"

Heat blazed through her. "Of course not! I may not always take the moral high ground, Mr. Raines, but I certainly do not whore myself out to everyone."

"Could make some money at it," Raines said, studying her face. "You're pretty, have a decent body."

"Only decent, Mr. Raines? Thank you so much."

"Haven't seen your passion yet, but I suspect it's in there somewhere. Guess we'll find that out later tonight. You might have a future no matter what happens here."

"I'm not whoring myself out to anyone," Jessie stammered, "other than you and Billy, of course. And I fully intend to forget all of it once this entire sordid episode is over. And if you're gentlemen, you'll forget it as well."

"Don't have a gentle bone in my body." He slowly slid his hand over her hip and up her body. Jessie's breath stuttered in her chest as his fingertips grazed her breast. "Though silence can be bought for a price."

She jerked away from him. "Tell me, Mr. Raines. What rock were you under before you slithered out?"

Raines laughed. "The one next to yours, Mrs. McGee. We'll go see your Nathaniel. But it won't be today. I have an alternate plan."

He seized her hand and dragged her out of the woods again, this time in a reversal of his previous mood, but she still had to run to keep up with his long legs. When she stumbled, he caught her under the knees and lifted her in his arms. He strode through the trees as though carrying helpless people had always been part of his everyday life.

"I can walk by myself, you maniac."

"Yes, you can, but you seemingly can't walk and talk at the same time, and I've got to speak to Billy."

* * * *

Jessie didn't know exactly how their plans had changed, and she couldn't figure out how she'd suddenly lost any control of the situation. Her hands clenched on the reins. They had a deal, damn it, and now the men had changed the plans without her permission. Billy and Raines were thick as thieves and very stingy with their information. But suddenly the little caravan switched direction and headed back toward her own house. Their confrontation with Nathaniel Prentice had been delayed another day, and she was worried sick about Jane.

She didn't think Prentice would hurt Jane, but she couldn't be sure because she now suspected Prentice might be more dangerous than

she'd thought. Her conversation with Raines proved it. If a man like Raines knew about Nathaniel, he was involved in some seriously nefarious business dealings. Ellie had implied prostitution, and that didn't bode well for Jane. She shuddered thinking how close she had come to marrying Prentice.

She also had no idea what might be waiting for her when she arrived at her farm. She wasn't looking forward to any surprises Ellie might have in store for her. She prepared herself for the worst. She patted her jacket pocket and felt the comforting shape of her father's gun. She called to the men who rode in front of the wagon.

"The house is right around this bend!"

Raines lifted his arm to show he'd heard her, and Jessie leaned back. Butterscotch dutifully followed the two horses walking in front of her as she followed the men.

My ass. I'm not letting these men control my damn life.

The wagon turned onto the rocky pitted lane that led to home, and Butterscotch stopped in the dooryard because she knew her place.

Martin jumped from the wagon and set to unbridling the mare. Jessie followed him then stormed over to the two thickish thieves who once again muttered between them like they held the secrets to national policy. She slammed her hands on her hips, tapping her foot on the stones, waiting for them to notice her. They continued their whispering until she cleared her throat. Loudly. They both pivoted, looking at her with the expectation of a father who's been interrupted during business. She knew that look. But her father had usually smiled after a moment. These bounty hunters didn't.

"This is my rescue mission. Why am I even allowing the two of you the option of being in charge? I hired you, remember?"

Billy glanced at Raines and pursed his lips. "She gets a little feisty with too much quiet time. I suggest we keep her occupied as much as possible. Hungry?"

"If you think I'm cooking for—" Jessie sputtered.

"We're guests, aren't we?" Raines asked.

"Guests, my ass. I didn't invite you here. You invited yourselves and changed my plans in the bargain."

"Plans sometimes need to change based on intelligence," Raines said.

Jessie tilted her head and smiled. "We would need to find some intelligence first. It sure as hell isn't standing in front of me."

"I think you'd be surprised," Billy said, "but of course we can't say a word. Hush-hush and all that. She's a little tense, Cutter. We'll have to take care of that later."

Jessie flushed when Billy's eyebrows rose meaningfully, but she clenched her teeth, determined they wouldn't sidetrack her. "Someone better start talking. I'm losing patience."

Raines slid his saddlebags from his horse. "You'd have to possess something before you lose it, Mrs. McGee."

Jessie managed to strangle her screech, stalked back to the wagon and snatched up her bag. As she walked past the men, Raines dropped his saddle bag across her shoulder, and she staggered, nearly collapsing to the ground.

"Just trying to keep you busy. We prefer you in a good mood. But, like Billy said, we can take care of that later." He winked.

* * * *

She pushed open the barn door. Dust motes and chaff swirled in the late afternoon sun, creating a haze and nearly blinding her. Voices drifted from the darkness, and she stood for a moment flapping her arms, trying to see through the particles that choked her. Coughing and sputtering, she squeezed through the door that seemed to be stuck on rusty hinges. Damn. She'd just oiled them. The last rain had taken its toll.

What are they doing in here? They can't be here. They'll find everything. Oh, dear God, what am I going to do?

She nearly stumbled when Billy materialized out of the haze and tugged on her arm, pulling her into the dark interior. He threw his body against the door and it slammed shut, rocking precariously against its moorings. His cheery voice sounded incongruous in the well of darkness as he pulled her inside.

"Place needs a little work."

"I've been a bit short-handed," Jessie said.

"That's obvious. This barn could fall down around our ears. Thought I'd go out in a more dignified manner."

Raines' voice came out of the blackness, curling around her like smoke. "Nothing but dignified for you, Billy. I've no doubt you're preparing your death scene as we speak."

A shadow detached itself from the others and walked through the shafts of sunlight slanting through the decaying barn timbers. Its wavering shape shimmered and shifted, disturbing the debris on the floor as it passed and sending up a swirling mist of gold.

"I like to know my lines," Billy said.

"I like it too, but we don't always have that luxury."

Raines' dark, disturbingly beautiful face emerged from the haze. She gulped, wondering if she'd ever become immune to the effect he had on her. She moved a slight distance away and closer to Billy. She liked Billy, and he made her feel comfortable and pretty but didn't fill her with quite as much anxiety. The less anxiety, the better. She spread her arms and turned in a circle.

"Speaking of luxury, what are you two doing out here? This barn hasn't been used in a very long time. Don't have enough stock to use it. I've been keeping all the animals in the stable. Believe me, it's in far better shape."

Raines tipped his hat. "Thought we'd bunk out here. A man sometimes needs his own space. Is there a problem with that?"

She nearly choked on the panic that flooded through her.

A problem? Try every problem imaginable. You're standing in the middle of my way station.

His words caused an avalanche of anxiety to tear through her and for a brief moment she thought she might pass out. She rubbed a finger against her temple at the sudden headache that slammed into her. These men were not good for her. She'd done nothing but fight disturbing sensations since she'd met them. Their presence not only threatened her sanity but her work as well. Why had she subjugated her common sense, her goals and sound mind to the will of these men?

She steeled her expression and met Raines' eyes. Her foot brushed at the loose blades of straw on the floor, trying to conceal the knots in the wood she'd deliberately carved out into wider holes.

"No, of course not. No problem. Why would there be a problem?"

She shut up. Her words had tumbled out too fast. She realized she still rubbed her head and dropped her hand, glancing around, squinting in the haze. Raines stood on a board that wobbled unsteadily beneath his feet. The way her luck ran lately, his weight would crack the board and he'd plunge straight down four feet into a shallow pit. She'd have a tough time explaining that, though one pit was far easier to explain than the dozen or so spread throughout the barn under its floor. She glanced at the back of the barn where the well-oiled trap door in the wall lifted, offering a quick entrance and exit. It seemed intact. The bales of decaying hay piled around the escape area looked undisturbed. But damn it. She had to get out of this barn before she said something really stupid.

"I'll start supper while you make yourselves comfortable." She turned on her heel and struggled with the barn door, ruining her exit.

* * * *

"There's another one here, Cutter."

Raines hunkered down as Billy swiped his boot across the board. He pushed his fingers through the hole in the wood and lifted the board, slanting it sideways across the depression. Dirt and debris

scattered into the pit below. He removed another board then leaned back.

Raines peered inside, judging the pit to be at least four feet deep. "Jesus Christ. How many is that?"

"At least a dozen," Billy said. "More than enough to handle any size group. They rarely travel even that large and some of them are kids."

"She's a bitty thing to have done this on her own." Raines settled the boards back over the hole and swept his hand along the planks, pushing some straw over the disturbance.

"We don't know for sure she's the one even did it. If she doesn't use this barn, she might not know. Her husband may have been involved."

Raines rested his arm across his knee and glanced at the barn door. "Oh, I think she's involved. I think our Mrs. McGee has gotten herself embroiled in a little abolitionist politics. Did you see that look of panic on her face?"

"Was too busy watching you, Cutter."

Raines' head shot up. "What the hell for?"

"I like the way you watch her."

Raines stood up and slammed the hat down on his head. "Jesus Christ, Billy, I don't watch her. I've got more on my mind than some little backwoods chit."

"Sure, Cutter, whatever you say. Though she *is* the one Prentice wants."

"I know that, Billy."

"Dropped into our laps quite nicely, wouldn't you say? That was a bit of luck. Couldn't have asked for—"

"Didn't ask you. And Prentice gets her over my dead body."

Billy glanced up and smirked. Raines folded his arms across his chest.

"Did you think I'd just hand over the bait?" Raines asked.

"Some bait sure is tastier than others."

Raines blew out a breath. "We're not fishing here, Billy. What she looks like doesn't matter."

"Course not. I'm just saying—"

"We don't just hand over bait. We're the good guys."

"Course we are." Billy glanced at the rafters. "At least I think we are. Hard to know sometimes. Using a girl for bait is kind of an ethical dilemma, no matter how it ends. Depends a lot on—"

"Spare me the philosophy, Billy. We don't need to muddy the waters."

"Sure thing, Cutter. So when do we see Prentice?"

"Meeting's scheduled in a couple days."

"Going to be hard to put her off that long. She wants those people back."

Raines slid his hat back. "She's just going to have to be patient."

Billy dropped to the ground and felt along the floorboards. "Ha! Good luck with that, Cutter."

"I can't risk failing on this mission, not even for her. We're too close."

Billy's fingers hooked beneath another board and tugged. The board came away too easily and Billy hurtled backwards on his ass, the board ripping out of his hands and clattering across the planks.

Raines dodged for it. "Watch what you're doing. Whether she knows about this station or not, I don't want her to catch us snooping around."

Billy rolled over and pushed himself up. "Seems to me it would be a lot easier if we just asked her some questions. There's more to this story than she's telling."

"I like watching her squirm."

"I knew it!"

"Doesn't mean anything." Raines jumped into the hole, wedging his body into the small space, and dropped to his knees. "I like to keep people off-balance. Easier to control them that way."

Billy waggled his eyebrows. "As long as I get some fun out of it, I'm in." He put his hand on Raines' shoulder and whistled. He leaned further, practically losing his balance. Raines gave him a little shove to keep him on his feet. "Looks like someone's planned for Armageddon."

Raines nodded. Baskets of apples and pears, potatoes, carrots and turnips lined one dirt wall. Canning jars of all sizes stacked in neat, orderly piles lined two of the walls, holding fruits and vegetables of all kinds—peaches, jellies, corn and beans. Ceramic jugs with corked tops filled the other. Several metal tins sat perched on a basket of apples. Raines picked up one and pried the top off. Medical supplies—iodine, bandages, tweezers, needle and thread. Not much, but enough to stitch up cuts and pull out briars.

"Tin's not dusty," Billy said. "It's been used recently."

"Noticed that."

"Can't be her husband, right? Gotta be her."

"Beginning to look that way. These fruits are freshly picked, not more than a week."

"She's not after property," Billy said. "She's after friends. Planning to say anything?"

"Nope. In fact ..." He hoisted himself out of the hole and settled the board back in place. Using his boot, he swept a nice little nest of straw over the covered pit. He walked to his saddlebags, flipped one open and pulled out his bedroll. With a snap, he laid it out and adjusted it until the entire area had been consumed in a blanket of red.

Billy arched a brow and laughed. "You have a Machiavellian air, Cutter, you know that?"

"That's a new one, Billy."

Chapter 5

Her hired man returned after delivering several jugs of water to the barn. Rob Ketchum stood in the doorway, his tall, slender body ram-rod straight. He pulled off his hat and ran a hand through his graying hair. A frown settled on his dark face, and Jessie prepared for a barrage of questions. She wiped her hands across her pants, smearing them with suds. He gave her clothing a dubious glance, his frown deepening.

"Don't like it, Jessie. Don't like it at all."

Rob stepped over the threshold, careful to wipe his boots on the mat. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it. He twirled the hat around in his fingers. She waved him toward a chair, and Rob took a couple of reluctant steps forward. He glanced again at her trousers.

"Don't seem fitting and proper at all," Rob said, "a lady dressed like that."

"I stopped worrying about propriety months ago, Rob. I'm not exactly going to a cotillion, and it seemed necessary yesterday. Though I'm wondering what went through my head."

"Wonderin' that myself." The cursory glance he gave her proved he wondered about a lot more than her clothing, but Rob wouldn't question her about that, at least not outright.

"Got something on your mind besides my clothes?"

The man dropped into a chair, his face passive, but his distress evident in the deep brown eyes. He studied her, and she straightened up under his inspection. She didn't like that slight glimmer of

disappointment she saw there. As quickly as it appeared, it vanished and turned into something else.

"Got lots on my mind, but I can wait till you're ready to tell."

She'd seen this particular look many times in the last couple of months, though this concern wasn't about the railroad. He'd argued with her over the decision to support a station but Rob was a good man. When she'd begun her work, he'd feared to be directly involved, not because he lacked the bravery to take a stance, but because his own freedom had been so recently bestowed. Rob lived in a tenuous world, and she'd hated to drag him into her turmoil. He'd initially turned a blind eye. He'd done his work around the farm, taken care of the animals, and helped her load the supply well when needed, but that's as far as he would go. Said he valued his new freedom too much to risk it.

But slowly and cautiously he'd become more involved until the station became his primary work, and his goal was to give others what he'd been so happy to receive.

"There's no danger," she said softly.

He raised his graying brows. She knew he saw through her. He always did. His hand patted his trousers pocket unconsciously. The soft crinkly sound of his freedom papers swirled up and met his sigh. His freedom papers never left his person. He carried the papers—signed by Frank McGee as a gift to his bride on their wedding day—everywhere.

When Jacob Travers gave the young couple a hundred acres and old cottage on his property, Frank had very little and nothing to give her. When Jacob had sent Rob with them to work on the struggling homestead, Frank had asked Jessie to write the paper that night. He signed it eagerly, giving Rob his freedom willingly and easily, as though it was a choice he'd been happy to make. Frank readily offered his mother's maiden name when Rob needed to choose a name for the document. The older man had elected to stay with them despite the fact they had no way to pay a newly-freed man.

Jessie had known and loved Rob all her life and would never willingly put him in jeopardy. She tried to remind herself she hadn't brought the men here. They'd brought her. But somehow it seemed her fault it had upset him.

"So?" she asked. "What are they doing?"

"One of them is tinkerin' around in some kind of box," Rob said. "Don't know what's in it. Couldn't tell."

"That would be Billy. He can't sit still. What about the other one?"

"The other one is still enough," Rob said. "Loungin' on his bedroll, readin' a book, like he don't have a care in the world. Don't know what book 'cause I've not studied much lately. Seems my teacher is gallivantin' all over the countryside dressed as a boy." Once again his glance dropped to her trousers and a sour expression puckered his mouth.

"We'll get back to your lessons when things calm down. I promise. It doesn't matter what he's reading, as long as he's not snooping around."

Rob rubbed his hands over his face. "Might have already done a little of that. Things don't feel right in there. And he's got his bedroll right over the storage cubby."

"Oh, dear God." She dropped into a chair as sweat pooled between her breasts.

"What you goin' do, girl? Passengers will be through in a day or two, might even come quicker if the journey's not hard. Might even be tonight."

"Stop pressuring me, Rob. I've got enough to worry about." Jessie yanked her fingers through her hair, pulling it tight.

"So do we light up tonight? Put out the ribbon? Planned to when you went off to your pa's."

She smiled and leaned forward, wrapping her hand around his. "You were going to light the lantern? You've never done that before, Rob."

"Just 'cause I don't do it, don't mean I don't care. Just seemed like your job. It's your place."

"It's our place."

A ghost of a smile flickered on Rob's sullen face. "I like the sound of that."

"I couldn't do any of this without you."

"Not true, Jessie. You can do anythin' you set your mind to. You don't have a bit of fear in you. Not like me."

Jessie fanned her face. "You'd be surprised, Rob. Sometimes I wallow in fear." She patted his pocket and the rustle of the page made Rob smile again. "But you don't have to be afraid. You have your papers. They'll keep you safe."

He glanced up her. "Well, now, I don't know that I believe that 'tirely. Seems to me a piece of paper is a bit flimsy to stake your life on, and even you won't be safe if somethin' goes wrong. Besides, papers didn't keep Jane and the others safe."

She heaved a sigh and fell back in her chair. "No, you're right. Nothing's safe right now, and nobody's truly out of harm's way. But Pa did the best he could, and I think he'd have done more with enough time."

Rob shook his shaggy head, pulling on his chin. "Was truly sorry to hear about your pa. Marty told me about it. Seems a might fishy to me. So sudden like that and all. I 'spect you'll get to thinkin' about that in time."

She nodded, wishing Rob weren't quite so talkative. He stirred up emotions she'd been trying to keep under control. Thinking about her father hurt her inside.

"Got a bit on your plate at the moment findin' Jane and the others. Sure hope you find them. Got a hankerin' to see Glory." He winked at her. "Like to taste her cookin' again. That was a fine weddin' feast she put on at your pa's."

"Seems to me you might have more than cooking on your mind, Rob."

A huge smile spread across his face then he stood up and stretched his lean frame. "Well, whatever happens. If she's a free woman now, well, I wouldn't mind seein' where it goes. Got a little extra room in my cabin if she's a mind to it." He pushed the hat down on his head and patted his pocket. "So, about the light?"

"Give me a half hour."

Rob nodded. "'Night, Jessie. Don't worry about Marty. He's tuckered out. Fell asleep the minute his head touched the pillow. He'll be fine at my cabin." He left as quietly as he came, closing the door with a soft click and leaving the problem in her hands.

Jessie finished washing the bowls and stacked them in the cupboard. She was grateful Martin had asked to sleep at Rob's cabin. She wondered how she'd be able to look at him every morning, not knowing what he might have seen or heard. In a one-bedroom house it would have been nearly impossible to hide anything. She grabbed a candlestick, ran into her bedroom and stripped off the clothes she'd been wearing for two days. She quickly washed up in the basin, splashing the cool water over her hot, sweaty body and scouring her skin with soap and washcloth.

She flipped through the dresses hanging on the pegs. She pulled one free, sniffed at it then yanked it over her head, running her hands down her frame to smooth out the wrinkles. Not that they'd see it well in the dark, or even for very long. She intended to lure them back to the house and out of her barn.

She ran a brush through her hair and pinched her cheeks, staring into the speckled mirror above the wash basin. She'd looked better. She touched the skin beneath her eyes, noting the dark circles. Nothing could be done about that. She'd had a little stress in her life lately, and she'd just have to deal with the consequences. A haggard expression seemed nothing by comparison when she thought of what Jane might be going through.

She didn't have long to worry about it. As she still struggled with what she could use to lure them to the house—coffee, cake, what?—

and pinched her cheeks once more for luck, someone knocked on the door. She pushed her feet into shoes and ran.

Heart pounding and breathless, she swept open the door. She had no idea what to expect, but whatever happened, she knew it would be a new experience. Part of her looked forward to it. The other part felt pure terror.

Billy burst into the room and swept her up in his arms, swinging her around in a circle. He plunged his face into her neck and growled like a mountain lion. A curious fit of giggles burst from her mouth, shocking her. She'd never giggled in her entire life, not even when her father had tickled her as a child. Tickling annoyed her, and her father had received one or two kicks for trying to tickle her into a good mood. He learned fast that when Jessie Travers got into a bad mood, she stayed there until she was ready to come out.

"Oh, Jessie, I waited and waited, and you never came," Billy crooned into her neck.

"I was just on—"

"And you smell heavenly. What is that glorious aroma?"

"Just me."

"Just Me? Is that a new French perfume? It's perfect for you."

He dipped her downward, locked his lips on her throat and shook his head like a big cat with prey, growling and purring. She threw back her head and laughed and, from her upside-down vantage point, saw a very stoic Cutter Raines plodding over the threshold, holding his book.

Billy continued to prattle, dropping her feet to the ground and holding her at arm's length. "And you look positively ravishing in that dress. Pink suits you. Doesn't it, Cutter?" He lifted her arm above her head and twirled her around, as though they danced at a ball.

Raines grunted and tossed his book down on the table, throwing himself into a chair. He pulled off his hat and slammed it down. "The bastard woke me up. Had just drifted off."

Billy reached out and ruffled the dark mat of hair on top of Raines' head, making it stick up in black spikes. Raines swatted his hand away and raked his hands through the strands.

"Well, we had a rendezvous, Cutter. Wouldn't want to miss the charming Mrs. McGee in this beautiful dress, now, would you?"

"No, wouldn't want that." Raines pulled the book toward him and flipped it open to a page. "You two play house or whatever it is you plan to do. If I doze off, leave me the fuck alone."

Billy reached for his hair again, and Raines jerked away.

"Christ, Billy, lay off!"

Billy leaned down and whispered loudly in her ear. "He gets a might touchy when he's tired. He's worse than a child. But that doesn't have to interfere with our fun. May I have this dance, Mrs. McGee?" He bowed, sweeping his arm across his waist and bending his leg.

Jessie laughed, spread out her dress, and curtsied. Billy began to hum and pulled her into his arms. He sang a rather complicated tune, complete with sweeping crescendos and low soft melodies, filling in words he didn't remember with la-das and da-dums, guiding her around the room with a skill she'd never seen in any of the local men. He twirled her, spun her, moved her from corner to corner and around the table. She found herself caught in his enthusiasm and simply moved with him, enjoying his fluid grace. When he reached the end of his tune, he twirled her twice, making her dizzy, then gave her a little nudge. She dropped straight into Raines' lap, draping across him like a rag doll.

He grunted, and the chair tilted backwards. His arms wrapped around her as he struggled to control his balance. Her head fell against his shoulder when he pushed the chair upright, and the legs thumped against the floor. He gave Billy a scathing look.

Billy winked. "You weren't sleeping yet, Cutter. Just smell her." He nodded at Jessie.

Playing along, Jessie swept the hair away from her neck and tilted her head. Raines leaned forward and sniffed tentatively.

* * * *

The smell hovering on her skin seemed the sweetest scent he'd ever smelled, pure girlish essence combined with a hint of womanhood. He'd forgotten such good things existed in the world. But he'd be damned if he'd let Billy pull him out of his mood. When he wallowed, he liked to do it thoroughly and quietly. Billy interfered with both of those things. He'd moved across the room now and rooted through the cupboards like he owned the little house. Raines took advantage of his preoccupation and allowed himself, for one moment, to enjoy the girl in his arms.

She nestled against him, seemingly content and comfortable. So petite and lovely, her weight settled against him like a child's, but the soft skin and gentle curves tempted him with a power only a woman could possess. She leaned back in his arms and dropped her head back to answer something inane Billy had asked. Both of them laughed. Raines had no idea what they talked about.

He stared at the slim column of her throat, wondering what she'd do if he pressed his lips to the pulse in her neck. Damn. At the thought, his cock grew beneath her against his will. As he leaned closer, Jessie suddenly sat straight up, nearly smacking him in the forehead. She wiggled on his lap, and her glance darted to his. Eyes wide, she blushed furiously.

"I don't often have a woman sprawled in my lap."

"I would think it a common occurrence for you, Raines. Perhaps you should do it more often. Seems to perk you up." She wiggled again and gave him a shy little smile.

Raines glanced at her mouth. "It might have been the smell of you, Mrs. McGee. I find it intensely—"

"Found some!" Billy shouted. He came across the room and slapped a jar on the table. "Jam. Not blackberry. Appears to be strawberry. But I'm guessing it's pretty tasty." He popped the lid off and inhaled. "Smells delicious."

Jessie shook her head. "I don't have any biscuits. I could make some tomorrow if—"

Billy cocked a brow. "We won't be needing any biscuits, my little French tart. We have all the buns we need right here."

He took Jessie's arm and yanked her from Raines' lap. He swatted her bottom. Jessie shrieked and darted around the table. Billy followed, stalking her slowly, dodging left and right as Jessie moved.

Raines watched the two of them playing like children in a schoolyard. An unusual feeling circulated through him as he listened to their laughter, winding through him with a dim heat to settle somewhere in his gut where it coiled and shifted, filling him with irritation. His fist curled on the table.

Oh, no, not going down that path.

For the first time in a very long time, perhaps forever, Raines thought he might be jealous. Of his best friend? Billy was the only human being he'd been able to tolerate lately, and damn it, he needed Billy to keep him sane. He shook off whatever foreign emotion tried to catch him as he would summer raindrops and pulled the open jar toward him. He'd just play with them and take the few moments of normalcy he could. His cock was still hard, and after everything he'd been through since hooking up with General Ulysses S. Grant and the Army of the Tennessee, he planned to take advantage of it.

When Jessie scooted within reach, he grabbed her hand and pulled her back into his lap.

Those green eyes swung up to his, filled with the sparkle of laughter. For a split second he forgot his intent and simply stared. Her smile wavered as he tightened his arm around her waist. He tried to smile, but suddenly seemed to have forgotten how. He wanted to kick his own ass. How could a man forget how to smile? Sure, the last

couple of years had been rough, more than rough. But had he fallen so far into hell he'd forgotten how to smile at a beautiful woman?

Billy's hand appeared between them as he smeared a gooey glob of strawberry jam on Jessie's lips. Raines lifted his head stupidly when Billy said, "Taste her, Cutter."

His cock understood faster than he did, hardening and shifting, lunging beneath the girl in his arms. He dipped his head toward her as she lifted her face. His tongue touched her mouth, and the taste of the strawberries—or was it her?—caused a groan to escape from him. The strawberries. Definitely. He'd always been partial to strawberries. He licked the rim of her mouth then his tongue dipped inside hoping to catch the last tidbit. When he pulled away, Billy lifted Jessie's hand and scooped her finger into the jar. When she moved it to Raines' mouth, he jerked back.

"Now now, Cutter, she's not going to hurt you," Billy crooned. "Let her get a taste too."

Feeling like the world's biggest fool, he sat stiffly and allowed Jessie to smear jam on his lips. Her hand curled around the back of his neck and she drew his face closer. Her tongue peeked out and leisurely licked his mouth, the soft flesh swirling over his lips and then inside, sending a bolt of sensation directly from his mouth to his cock.

* * * *

When Jessie wiggled in Cutter's lap, Billy thought things just might be looking up for his friend. He suspected Cutter's cock might be back in working order. Cutter had been worrying about that lately, so much so he'd taken to watching the festivities instead of participating.

Gonna have to put an end to that.

When Jessie finished her strawberry-kiss and drew away, Cutter wore an actual smile. It did Billy's heart good to see it. And Jessie, the little minx, looked positively lustful. Her eyes simmered with heat, and he'd relish being scorched. Now here was a girl who'd been cheated in her marriage bed, and he knew what a marriage bed should hold. His had held magic.

For a moment his heart stuttered in his chest as Clarissa's image filled his mind. His sweet, beautiful wife held a tiny infant in arms, but he'd known even then they only had a few moments more together. Within the next hour, his perfect little family, his wife and newborn daughter, both died and his life—that life—shattered and disappeared. He might as well have died with them.

He shook his head, refusing to go down that path. When Jessie's sultry little laugh reached him, he pulled out his best smile. He played along, dabbing jam on various parts of their faces, a drop on her cheek, a bit on Cutter's chin. He liked watching them lick and nibble each other. It stirred his cock and the life he lived felt real.

Of course he had no interest in feeling alive, but pretending had become second nature to him. Acting suited him just fine, a way to hide in broad daylight. He kept his scars well hidden, and he had no real desire to return to the land of the living. He'd leave that to those with beating hearts. His own heart only beat out of thirty-odd years of habit.

Bringing Cutter back into the land of the living was what held his interest. Lincoln setting their mission and making them a team might have saved both their sorry asses. He'd been very close to joining up on the side of the Blue, if only to catch a stray Confederate bullet on a battlefield. Cutter'd been trying to get himself killed in the seamy underbelly of Washington. They'd both harbored a death wish and been searching for someone else to pull the trigger. Fortunately, Billy had a friend in the highest of all places. Lincoln had seen his descent and thought his skills would be useful to the cause. He'd teamed him up with a loose cannon at General Grant's request, and ordered them to Kentucky where the link between the northern and southern railroads balanced precariously.

His friend harbored some secrets he wouldn't even share with Billy, so Billy knew they were bad. Following Grant from battlefield to battlefield couldn't have been easy. Billy'd seen the aftermath of some horrendous battles, and the carnage seemed unreal. He'd done his patriotic duty on the stage. Even people in the midst of war needed diversion, and he'd been happy to oblige. He certainly wasn't a coward, but how could he fight for a cause when the very breath he took meant nothing to him? The stray bullet had begun to appeal to him more and more, but he'd managed to resist the death wish for long enough and now had a slight reprieve.

Cutter was a different sort. No diversion for Cutter. His patriotism forced him into the choking chaos of war. No hiding the consequences of that patriotism for Cutter either. He wore his scars. They showed in the lines of his face, the posture of his body, the goto-hell demeanor. He wasn't ready to relinquish his pain. Cutter had been in the thick of this war, and he'd paid the price. After that, espionage must seem like a walk in the park. At least now Cutter had control over the damage he inflicted and the pain he caused. And occasionally it all worked out, and they made a difference in someone's life. That counted for something.

Although Billy didn't think he was quite ready to live, he had no real wish to die now. In fact, Cutter alone made his life worthwhile and offered a splendid challenge. That smile on his face seemed a damn good start.

And this girl? Well, she just might count for something too. Maybe she offered redemption and a glimpse of hope for both of them. He sure wanted to find out.

Billy slipped his hand inside the bodice of her dress, smearing a trail of jam across her skin. She shrieked and tugged the cloth away.

"Damn it, Billy! That jam's going to make a stain."

"Not a problem," Cutter said.

Surprisingly, his big fingers had no trouble with the tiny buttons. Billy watched, fascinated. Cutter opened the cloth, baring her breasts. He dipped his head toward her and licked a pathway up to her throat.

"You missed some," Billy said.

Jessie laughed when he dotted a spot of jam on her nipple. Cutter didn't hesitate. His mouth locked on her breast and Jessie gasped, throwing her head back. Billy took full advantage. His mouth swooped on hers and covered her lips. She arched closer and wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, holding him tight. He hadn't tasted anything as good in a very long time, not even Little Miss Bitchy's blackberry jam.

* * * *

The heat burst through her body, catching Jessie off guard. It smoldered in her chest and spread through her limbs quickly, sizzling through her veins like crackling fire. The warmth pulsed through her, settling in her pussy, which suddenly throbbed, matching the erratic beat of her heart. The muscles inside of her clenched each time Raines' mouth drew on the tip of her breast. An excruciating pressure built somewhere inside of her, threatening to tear her apart.

She tugged Billy closer. His kiss deepened, his tongue sweeping into her mouth. She couldn't focus on either man. Her concentration unraveled until the only thought in her head revolved around putting out the fire blazing inside her.

Billy pulled away, and Raines scooped her tighter in his arms. He lifted his face, and her nipple, damp and warm from his mouth, protested against the chill and ached unbearably. He rose with her still in his arms and headed into the bedroom.

The heat continued to spiral through Jessie, wanting their mouths, needing their mouths.

The moment her feet touched the floor, she tugged at her dress, struggling with shaky, frustrated hands to get it off her arms as

quickly as possible. Billy pulled it down while she kicked off her shoes and stepped out of the puddle of fabric until she stood naked.

For an excruciating moment, both men simply stared at her, their gazes traveling the length of her body, sparking more flames where their eyes grazed.

"For the love of God," Jessie whispered. "Someone touch me." Neither man moved.

"Now," she snapped.

She reached out and gripped Raines' hands, spreading his palms on her breasts. She sighed when his fingers curled around her. The ache in her nipples intensified and rippled downward to the swollen flesh of her pussy, which pulsed with need. She stepped closer, smashing her breasts into his hands and rubbing to appease the need for touch. He moved behind her, and she moaned at the loss until his hands swept under her arms and touched her breasts again, rolling her nipples between his fingers.

Billy dropped to his knees in front of her and his hands circled her hips, his fingers digging into the flesh of her ass. He tugged slightly until her pussy came against his mouth. His tongue swiped her skin and she shook.

"Oh, Billy." She could barely get her breath. "What are you doing?"

A long delicious shudder rippled through her entire body.

He lifted his head. "Your husband never did this either? Jessie girl, you've been cheated."

His mouth latched onto her again. Her knees buckled and she moaned as her head fell back against a hard chest. Raines' mouth came down and covered hers.

Billy's mouth searched her pussy, his tongue licking the moist flesh slowly, sending delightful tingles beneath her skin. His lips sucked gently on that piece of flesh he'd called her clit. She rocked her hips against his mouth. Wonderful sensations centered and spiraled from her clit as Billy's tongue worked some sort of magic. Her hands fluttered helplessly then wound through Billy's hair, pulling his face tighter. She felt his lips smile against her and his tongue speared into her pussy. He lapped her juices as she angled her hips toward him.

Raines' mouth moved slowly, spreading burning kisses from her mouth, to her cheeks, down her jaw and throat. His fingers continued to knead her breasts, stretching across the fullness and gripping hard, tugging on her nipples with a delicious tension.

Another glorious shudder burst through her body as her hips bucked against Billy's mouth. She moaned and closed her eyes, nearly falling. Raines moved an arm around her waist to steady her. Billy continued to suck her clit as wave after wave burst through her body, and a violent tremble racked her. Billy's lips offered soothing kisses and his tongue caressed her burning flesh, then his mouth disappeared, but his hands continued to caress her ass, in smooth gentle circles.

"Jessie."

She tried to focus on the sound of Billy's voice. Raines dropped a gentle kiss on one eyelid. She blinked and glanced down, smoothing Billy's wild hair away from his face, and cupped his cheeks. He felt so warm.

"I think I've died and gone to heaven," she whispered. "Where did vou learn to do that?"

He smiled "Once upon a time, I spent a little time in heaven myself. Kind of lost the direction lately."

She ran her fingers across his jaw and touched the smile on his face. "Can I help you find it again?"

"I'd like nothing more, darlin". But Cutter first. He doesn't remember what heaven feels like at all."

She didn't know how to take a man to heaven, but that wouldn't stop her from trying. She tilted her head back and found Raines staring at her. She couldn't read his eyes. He looked like heaven might be the last place he wished to go, but that wouldn't stop her

either. She reached behind her and hooked her fingers into the waistband of his trousers, tugging him the inch that separated them. His dark face lowered. She tried to smile but it caught somewhere inside her.

"Would you like to go to heaven, Mr. Raines?"

"Quite a distance from my personal hell, Mrs. McGee."

"A long journey can be quite entertaining with the right company." Billy's tongue swept over her clit again and she groaned. Her hand slipped down over Raines' crotch, her fingers curling around him. "I can show you the way if you let me."

Billy's voice drifted upwards, his breath warm on her bare skin. "Let her suck you, Cutter."

She had no idea what that meant, but she'd learn as she went. She'd do practically anything to keep Billy's mouth on her. Raines circled around to her side. She tugged on the buttons of his pants, trying to concentrate on the seemingly impossible task as those feelings swamped through her body again. Raines pulled away for one moment. The thunk of his boots hitting the floor brought her to reality for a moment. The rustle of fabric followed, and suddenly a hand grabbed her wrist. Her hand encountered a length of warm, pulsing steel and she wrapped her fingers around it eagerly, enjoying the smooth, silky texture and the heat that poured from him.

She held on tightly, squeezing a little, and it grew larger and harder in her hand. A laugh shot from her mouth. Raines made some sort of noise she couldn't gauge. He either liked it, or he didn't. She didn't care. She squeezed again, and when a strangled groan came from him, she knew she'd hit pay dirt. Now she just needed to know how to make him shudder.

She tugged on Billy's hair, and he lifted his face. She leaned down and whispered in his ear.

"What do I do now?"

"Suck his cock. He'll like it." He gave her a little shove, and she fell backwards on the bed. He tugged her hips down to the edge and

settled between her thighs. "Cutter, get the hell up on that bed. You're seeing heaven tonight if I have to kill you."

"That'll be the day," Raines growled.

"You have to sleep sometime, my friend," Billy said. "Now, I'm a busy man here and the lady's waiting on both of us. Stick your sorry cock in her lovely little mouth and enjoy yourself for once."

Jessie smiled in the dark and laughed when Billy's mouth latched once again onto her clit. As Cutter's weight settled on it, the mattress sank a little, and a shadow fell across her face. She felt the heat of him as he neared, and her arms reached out to touch him. Her fingers grazed his thigh, feeling the crisp hairs dusting masculine flesh. He jerked a little under her touch, and that growl came from him again. She knew now what that noise meant. A sense of power rose within her. She'd never known the touch of a woman could bring a man to his knees. Nice to know for the future. Of course, she'd had no idea the touch of a man could bring her to her knees either. She spread her thighs wider, and Billy's hands tightened under her ass.

Raines brushed the hair away from her face, a gentle caress. She moved her hand slowly up his thigh then circled behind to sweep up over his ass. His muscles clenched under her palm, and she squeezed and tugged a little.

"I think you're going to have to move closer," she whispered. "I won't bite. At least, I don't think so."

His bark of laughter liberated the last of her anxiety. When he swung his leg over her body and rose above her, planting his hands against the wall, she knew exactly what to do. She opened her mouth, and his cock slipped inside. Her lips closed around him, and her tongue delighted in the unusual sensation and taste. She wondered how it would taste with a little butterscotch. She sucked hard and grabbed his ass, pulling him down tight and drawing as much as she could inside. He stiffened for a moment, then his body relaxed, and he tugged against the suction, moving in and out in a slow, steady pace.

Billy's mouth disappeared, and his fingers caressed her thighs, pushing her legs even wider. A soft velvety sensation replaced his lips and swept over her clit then lower to push against her pussy lips. She pushed her body closer, and Billy's velvety cock slipped inside a little ways, then withdrew. Her body ached with an agonizing pulse. She was so wet the moisture dripped from her body.

When Raines pulled his body away slightly, she wrapped her hand around his cock and pulled her mouth away.

"Damn it, Billy. Don't tease me. Push it in. Give me all of it."

Billy gripped her hips and lunged against her, driving deep inside. She groaned with the pleasure as his cock filled the void, and gave her inner muscles something solid to clench against. It was another gift from heaven. She closed her lips over Raines' cock and sucked him back into her mouth.

Billy'd been right. She had been cheated—a married woman who'd never tasted the flesh of a man, had never known it was even a possibility? She took advantage of it now, tasting every inch, licking Raines' flesh from top to bottom, feeling the changes as it lengthened, swelled and pulsed with her attention. She thought Raines might like it. She was fairly positive. The sounds coming from his throat, and the way his body clenched beneath her hands signaled she must be doing something right. A delirious, irrational thought flickered through her head.

Finally something I'm good at.

Billy's movements became rough, passionate, hammering against her flesh, as though his only restraint had shattered with her request for more. That she should be this wanton should have bothered her. That she shared something so intimate with anyone but a husband should have shocked her. And, the final indignity, that she shared it with two, instead of one, should have her mind reeling and her sanity questioned. What would people think? Did other women even consider the possibility of doing what she did? What was wrong with her?

Nothing is wrong with you, Jessie McGee. When were you ever like other women?

She pushed all those thoughts away, willingly, cheerfully, with the abandon of new experiences and pleasures, with a focus on what she wanted from life. And she knew what she wanted—more than others had. She wanted more of everything, especially if everything included these feelings that swamped her body and stopped the chaos of her life, if only for the briefest moment.

These men offered gifts beyond her wildest dreams. If Frank had not known them or chose to keep them secret, if he thought she'd been too fragile or proper, then she would hand herself over to those more knowledgeable and less worried about her fragile constitution or what she might think. These men accepted her as she was and she loved it, relished it, and embraced it.

She threw off the last of her propriety, deciding her life was her own, to enjoy as she wished, to experience what she chose and reveled in this new adventure that had found her.

Abruptly her thoughts disintegrated. Billy's movements became rhythmic, rocking against her, touching something inside that stole her focus and half her mind. Her head fell back as her mind went blank and only one thought remained.

Oh, my God. He's a magician.

The feeling spiraling through her offered such promise, twisting and coiling around every nerve and muscle in her body. She pushed her hips closer, rocking with him. She accepted his passion, his desire to give pleasure to her and his need for his own. She listened to her lovers' rough words and the harsh sounds they couldn't seem to control. She watched the shadow of Raines' face above her. She touched everything she could reach, exploring skin, hair and droplets of sweat. Oh, a man's body offered such temptation and beauty. She'd never known that.

Poor Frank. He could have had all this.

As she accepted their movements and her mind sank into the sheer joy of her daring escapade, their bodies began to move in sync. Each time a cock moved within her, the other responded with the same depth, the same force until the rhythm pulled her into their harmony. As one man pounded her pussy and another fucked her mouth, she pushed aside every thought of her normal world and allowed herself to relish the sensations flooding through her body. From the sounds the men made, they too had left reality behind.

When Raines tensed above her, she clutched him closer. That small movement broke something inside of him and her mouth flooded with his seed—a salty bitterness that tasted like nothing she'd ever tasted before. He groaned above her just as Billy's cock hit a spot that sent ripples of sensation flooding through her. A wave of intense pleasure swept through her, cascading from deep inside to pulse out to her limbs. She tensed, her hips lifting to meet Billy as he drove into her one last time, and she felt the pulse of his fluid within her.

She dissolved into the bed as Raines' shadow moved away. Billy groaned and dropped to her chest. She felt him smile against her. Raines settled beside her on the mattress.

"Heaven is beautiful," she said sleepily.

[&]quot;So are you," he said.

[&]quot;I'll second that," Billy said.

Chapter 6

The sun seemed very high in the sky when Jessie opened her eyes. She bolted upright in bed, ripped off the blanket and lurched to her feet. She frantically searched the floor, trying to remember where she'd dropped her dress last night and finally found it partially shoved under the bed.

She ran her hands through the tangles of her hair and buttoned her dress quickly. Still in a sexual haze, Jessie struggled with the door handle, wondering what new disaster might await her. Had anyone come through the property last night? How did she allow herself to become so preoccupied when so many lives depended on her?

She rushed over the threshold, nearly stumbling in her haste to handle any one of so many disasters that might await and found ...

A perfectly normal morning. Or at least the normal she now lived in.

Raines and Martin sat at the table, their heads close together. They appeared to be talking and working on an object nestled between them. They lifted their heads when she practically fell into the room.

"Forget how to walk, Jessie?" Martin asked with a laugh.

Her glance darted frantically to the door, which opened onto a glorious morning. The bright red signal cloth hanging on the hitching post fluttered gaily in the breeze. The aroma of sizzling bacon drifted in with the morning air from the kitchen behind the house. Someone was cooking breakfast? When had her life gone from utter chaos to completely normal? Confused but relieved, Jessie headed to the hearth and snatched up her apron. She tied it haphazardly around her

waist and couldn't seem to focus. She grabbed a bucket and headed for the door.

"Coffee's ready," Raines said.

She stopped in her tracks. "Oh, well, thanks." She dropped the bucket and poured herself a mug of coffee, then leaned over his shoulder. Raines' big hands held her mother's music box. He turned it over and twisted the key, glancing up at Martin.

"Ready for the test?"

Martin nodded and Raines lifted the lid. The lovely swell of music filled the room and Martin laughed, pulling the box toward him.

Jessie's mouth dropped open. "How did you do that?"

Raines shrugged. "I used to be pretty good at fixing things." He stood up and held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

Wondering who had switched bodies with Raines overnight, Jessie put down her cup and stepped into his arms. He held her loosely but close and very slowly spun her around the room. For such a huge man he danced flawlessly, as though he'd spent his life in drawing rooms and fancy balls. His dancing skill surpassed even Billy's. His grace amazed her, and for one moment a smile skimmed his face. He tugged her a little closer, gazing into her face with all the attention of a real beau.

"You've done this before, Mr. Raines."

"Used to be pretty good at a lot of things."

"Seems you still are."

He bent his head whispered, "You inspire me, Mrs. McGee. And so does the squirt. Found him this morning trying to fix it himself."

Jessie saw the beautiful smile on Martin's face as he listened, enraptured, to the music. He paid them no attention at all, as though his sister danced with a strange man every morning.

"It's the only memory he has of our mother. Thank you for giving it back to him." She lifted her arms and cradled his face, dragging it down to hers. She pressed a gentle kiss on his mouth. "I can show you later how grateful I really am." "Another trip to heaven?"

"No one said you could only go once."

"Good morning, my angel!" Billy barreled into the house, balancing a huge platter of food on one palm. Rob followed. "Found your friend out in the kitchen making enough food for an army and thought to give him a hand."

An army? Once again Jessie's glance darted to the barn. Billy dropped the platter on the table as Rob headed to get plates from the sideboard. Billy put his hands on his hips.

"Dancing this early in the day? Why, Cutter, you're positively glowing."

Raines' arms dropped, and Jessie missed them. His brow lifted.

"Glowing, Billy? How exactly does one glow?"

Martin stood with the music box in his hands, glancing between the two men. "Happiness?"

Billy thrust out a finger and smiled. "Exactly, Galahad. Happiness." He patted his lips with his finger and cocked his head. "Now what exactly would make a man happy?"

Jessie took the plates from Rob and scattered them on the table, eager to get off the subject. "Let's all eat before it gets cold."

Billy spun her around and planted a huge kiss on her cheek, then pulled her into a bear hug. "Ah, my little angel from heaven, you're blushing. Don't concern yourself. I'll behave." He pulled away and clapped his hands. "Now, let's eat. I think Rob here has missed his calling. He could be a chef in one of Washington's finest hotels. Maybe even the White House."

Jessie moved to get the coffee pot, and Rob followed, leaning over and talking softly.

"No fears, Jessie. No one came last night."

She released a huge sigh. "Thank God. I'm not going to be able to take another morning like this. I've got to get them out of that barn."

* * * *

Jessie clutched the paddle in her hand and stirred the laundry in the kettle. The calluses on her hands protested. She pushed the clothes deeper into the water, pulling them back up, pushing them back in. The film of soap on the water was irregular, and she hoped it worked well enough. She hadn't quite perfected the art of soap-making, and she certainly couldn't afford to buy it. She worked harder, trying to stir up a lather.

In protest, splashes of water sprang out of the kettle and plopped into the fire below, sizzling and spitting when they touched the flames. One of the logs shifted and settled and Jessie yelped as a tongue of fire leapt across her skirt. She dodged, yanking the paddle from the water and rocking the kettle on its tripod. A tidal wave of boiling water flooded over the lip, and once again she hurtled backwards, tripping over the laundry basket and coming down hard against the ground.

"Damn it!"

Sparks ate at her dress. She patted furiously, cursing as each ember touched her skin. Her dress was both scorched and soaked, but she'd managed to avoid being burned by the scalding water. She kicked at the log that had shifted, her boot sending ash and sparks into the morning air.

"Damn it! I don't have time for this! When did I become their personal laundress?"

She glanced at the house but couldn't see any activity. She had no idea what the men did or what they planned, but they hadn't come any closer to finding Jane, and her frustration level increased with each passing moment. She had to figure out a way to get her passengers through the farm without Raines or Billy seeing them. She couldn't take any chances. She'd begun to suspect that they weren't exactly what they seemed. If Billy viewed Lincoln as a personal friend, they couldn't possibly be mercenaries taking advantage of a bad situation. But all of that wasn't helping to get her friends back.

She raked the hair back from her face and simply fell back on the ground, staring at the sky. Rob went about his chores with a calm face, but she knew inside he'd become a bundle of nerves. His hand touched his pocket hundreds of times throughout the morning. He liked the men, had told her as much, but didn't hold a bit of trust for them. Martin was completely enamored of both of them, and though she generally trusted her brother's judgment, she held too many lives in her hands to leave her trust issues to a twelve-year-old boy.

A shadow fell across her face.

"Looks like you're not very good at that," Raines said.

She hauled herself into a sitting position and glared at the overturned kettle. The clean clothes lay in a puddle of soapy, dirty water.

"No, unlike you, I'm not good at much," Jessie muttered. "I've never worked so hard in my damn life as the last six months. And I still don't get any better."

Raines hunkered down and lifted a sopping wet shirt up for inspection. He tossed it into the bucket of clean water nearby, then scooped up the other clothes and dropped them in as well. He knelt beside the bucket and plunged his hands inside, churning the clothes.

He glanced at her skirt. "Your dress is burned."

"I had a little accident." She surveyed the failed laundry attempt with a rueful smile. "Like I said, not really good at this lady of the manor stuff."

Raines glanced up, a puzzled expression on his face. His face swung from side to side as he viewed his surroundings. "Not much of a manor if you ask me."

Jessie followed his gaze, taking in the small house, the dilapidated barn, Rob's tiny cabin perched at the bank of the creek, a small but still reasonably sturdy stable. She counted her lucky stars for that. The fields needed tending, but she and Rob could only do so much work in a day and had managed to pull in a small harvest. She couldn't afford to hire outside help. There'd be a lot to do come spring before

planting, but she'd hoped to be in better financial circumstances by then. No, not a manor by any stretch of the imagination.

Jessie laughed and tilted her face. "You don't joke around much, do you?"

"Billy does enough joking around for the both of us. Someone has to keep us alive."

"When was the last time you had fun?"

Raines perused the length of her body and gave her a look that caused heat to rise in her cheeks. "Last night. This morning. Seems like plenty of fun for a man like me. Probably more than I can afford."

She found it hard to meet his eyes. Something about him made her stomach flip-flop. She didn't know if the muscles of his body caused it, or the deep midnight eyes, or the firm chin holding a day's growth of beard. She glanced at the barn, where Rob oiled the hinges on the door, trying to make it as easy as possible for their arriving guests to enter quietly.

"Well, I meant before the day I captured my own bounty hunter."

Raines tossed the sopping shirt into the empty basket on her other side. The water splashed all over her, soaking her dress. Immediately her nipples hardened, and his gaze riveted on her breasts. Jessie drew up her legs, wrapping her arms around her knees, but his smile told her he'd seen plenty.

"Ha! You hardly captured me, *boy*." He slapped another shirt into the bucket. "Seems as though I might have had the upper hand."

Jessie tossed her hair. "I had you at gunpoint, Mr. Raines. Directly at your heart. I could have shot you dead."

Raines dropped back his head and laughed, and the sound spread through the clearing and made her warm. Something about this man brought out the best and worst in her. But she loved to hear his laugh.

"With an unloaded gun? Seems more likely you'll break my heart than shoot it." His hands stilled as his eyes drifted back to hers. Stunned, she sat frozen, unable to breathe, not sure how to respond. For the first time in her life, Jessie found herself speechless. Was he serious? Joking? No, Raines didn't joke around. Best just to ignore the statement, or she'd find herself in a worse predicament. She started to push herself to her knees and winced.

Raines scooted closer, wiping his wet hands on a pair of Frank's pants that hugged his body much too tightly for her comfort. Every muscle of his body was outlined, flexing with his movement. And his cock pushed against the fabric, a clear ridge straining the cloth. Her face burned just looking at him.

He raised the edge of her skirt. His big hand wrapped around her leg, lifted and touched several places where the skin had reddened. Raw spots of bright color blazoned on her pale skin. She winced again and tried to draw her leg away, but he held tightly to her ankle. "Not too bad, but we should get some salve on them."

"Are you a doctor now too?" she huffed. "I'm beginning to feel totally inadequate on my own farm."

"Settle down," he said softly.

His hands continued his inspection but his touch became less clinical as his fingers moved around her calf, and his thumbs caressed her skin. Her pussy throbbed in response but getting involved with Raines on a more personal level seemed the last thing she needed. Their bargain couldn't possibly extend into the daytime world or include only one of the men. That would be asking for more trouble than she could handle. Jessie reached down and slowly drew the skirt down her legs.

"I'm fine. Really."

He raised his eyes to hers and slowly moved toward her, nestling between her thighs, his body sliding over hers until their faces were so close, one movement would have brought their lips together. His breath, smelling of freshly baked bread and strawberry jam, fanned her face when he spoke.

"You're more than fine, Mrs. McGee."

Her glance skimmed his lips then caressed the stubble on his jaw and the rough planes of his face. "So are you, Mr. Raines."

He suddenly pulled back and moved away to plunge his hands into the bucket of water. She wanted to splash that water over her hot face. He tossed the remainder of the laundry into the basket. He rose and stepped over her, kneeling at the basket. He lifted a shirt and began to twist, wringing out the water. She noticed the bulge still straining the cloth of Frank's pants. She couldn't seem to tear her gaze away from the cock that seemed to be moving toward her. She wiped an arm across her sweaty forehead.

Trying to keep her mind on her tasks, she reached into the basket and grabbed another shirt, wishing night would fall.

* * * *

Jessie took charge and carried their saddlebags and belongings into the house. The men didn't say anything and didn't ask questions. They barely glanced at her as she passed where they sat at the table in the dooryard, talking quietly. It took her three trips, and when she finished, sweat clung to her and her irritation level had spiked.

On her final trip, she tossed things onto the bed and stalked outside. She stood with her hands on her hips until their faces finally swung toward her. They looked surprised to see her, as though she wasn't standing in her own dooryard.

"When are we going to see Prentice?" she snapped.

"When I say it's time," Raines said.

"And when will that be?"

"You're just going to have to trust us."

She screeched and marched back into the house. Now she had them out of the barn and underfoot constantly, and she had no idea what to do with them. She had barely known what to do with her own husband, though Frank spent so much time in the fields what to do with him was the least of her worries for those few weeks. These men were different. As the evening darkened, her anxiety level threatened to rise every time they went to the door or glanced out the window. She'd practically burned her hand on the kettle and now she struggled with the coffee tin, cursing when it wouldn't open.

"It's a little late for coffee," Raines said. "I'm going outside for a while."

He pushed on the chair rails and started to stand. The tin dropped from her hands and clattered across the countertop, spilling coffee in its wake. She ran across the room, nearly tripping on her skirt, and clapped him on the shoulder, pushing him back down into his chair. Her mind whirled, trying to find an excuse to keep them in the house. As she frantically searched the room for an idea of any kind, a light flickered through the window, the soft glow of a lantern near the barn. She tore across the room and yanked the curtains closed, her breath freezing in her chest. Sweat welled on her brow and she ran the back of her hand over her skin, feeling the cold clammy perspiration that seemed to have become part of her lately.

Think, Jessie, think.

The scrape of a chair nearly tore a scream from her throat. She turned to them with a bright smile and held up a finger.

Raines sat back down and Billy stretched his legs across the floor and leaned back in the chair, rocking it on its rear legs.

"I made some cake."

"Do you bake as well as you do laundry?" Raines asked with a smirk.

Billy piped up, "I'd like some cake."

"I'm not interested in cake," Raines said. His dark gaze settled on her.

"Well, Cutter, a little cake always perks me—"

"I'm interested in her."

He stood and held out his hand. Confused, but slightly relieved, Jessie took a final glance at the window and stepped forward, laying

her hand in his palm. The touch of his hand seemed innocent enough, but the sensations that flooded her body were anything but—raw, primitive and, until recently, foreign. As his fingers closed over hers, they bound her to an anchor that tugged her into deep, dangerous waters. Those midnight eyes stared at her with fascination, searching for something inside her, luring her deeper. What did he want from her?

He tugged her to him gently until her lower body pressed against his. The sudden heat of him aroused a conflagration in hers. The flames didn't flicker across her flesh or flare in tiny sparks to dance through her body. They roared through without permission, consuming her suddenly in a hot, flashing inferno. She couldn't stop it. She didn't want to stop it.

She pushed closer until her hips pressed tightly against his.

She knew only an idiot would do such a thing. She'd never thought herself an idiot until now.

This bargain would kill her. Her body felt alive for the first time in her life, and soon these men would leave, and she'd go back to a lonely, widowed life pining away in this cabin for the touch of a man. Probably not just any man. Probably this one.

"The music box, Billy." He still stared into her eyes. "I'm interested in a little dancing tonight."

She found her breath. "Dancing?"

"Let's pretend," he seemed to consider his words, tilting his head as his stare dipped toward her mouth, "we're somewhere else."

"A cotillion!" Billy said. "Excellent idea, Cutter."

Billy leapt to his feet and lifted the music box off the sideboard. He began to twist the key. Jessie listened to the mechanical grind as the key turned, winding the gears, coiling the spring. As each rotation of the key tightened the spring inside the music box, her anxiety escalated. That key seemed to increase the tension inside her, winding through her own gears as though to rein in and cage that hot, primitive part she'd allowed loose. She'd been ridiculous to let it free, more

ridiculous to think she could control it. She allowed the sound of the key to pull those pieces back inside. Just as she heard the final click and the music began, she wondered what would happen when the spring inside her released.

Raines tightened his hold on her hand and tucked his arm around her waist. She lifted her other arm and placed her hand gently on his shoulder, and he began to move. She fell into the enchantment the music box spun into her small, isolated world and allowed Raines to take her elsewhere.

She pretended they had left the small cabin in northern Kentucky. They'd arrived at a formal ball in a big city, filled with sights she'd never seen, aromas she'd never smelled, people she'd never met. She closed her eyes and thought of a ballroom in an elegant hotel, at least how she envisioned it might be. She used Nathaniel Prentice's home as her guide because Prentice had a ballroom at Riverbend.

Raines swirled her around the table, her body swaying with his, but the table ceased to exist. They danced on a polished floor under a glistening chandelier, surrounded by guests in glittering gowns and elegant waistcoats. She envisioned herself in a dress of midnight blue, dipping low off her shoulders to show creamy, tempting skin, the skirt swirling around her legs as she danced. Her shoes would be fashionable and pinch her feet, but she smiled at the thought because the night was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and she wanted all of it, even the pinched toes.

The light captured the glint in her partner's eyes as they locked on her face, his attention riveted, as though she was the only woman in the room—which she was, but she didn't want to think of that.

When the tempo of the music changed, he turned and swung to the other side of the room, holding her arm up and twirling her until she felt dizzy. At her bidding, instead of the battered sideboard holding her cracked dishes and dingy linens, she caught the gleam of sparkling crystal and pristine china presented on a snowy white tablecloth illuminated by the light of hundreds of candles held in brass

sconces. The light flickered and flared as the breeze from their dancing stirred the flames.

He pulled her tighter. A change in the tinkling notes sent a tremor of excitement through her as she anticipated the next magical step he'd take. He circled slowly in front of the hearth then faster and faster as the light of the flames caught his dark hair and cast blue shadows through the strands. He suddenly dipped her low in his arms, and she envisioned the movements of dozens of people dancing and swirling around her in circles of their own, having the time of their lives.

He swooped around the table again, circling ever wider, and she heard the chatter around her, the sounds of people having fun, enjoying the company of others. Political dialogue filled her head and enticed her into conversations. Discussions of books and plays and social engagements vied for her attention, and she reveled in finally being able to talk about all of the thoughts and ideas that spun through her head. The music swelled and changed and the dance itself became exhilarating, delightful, spellbinding.

Exotic scents of French perfume and intoxicating liquor overwhelmed the smell of burnt ash and charred wood. Instead of the remains of her venison stew, she smelled the aromas of the most enticing dishes she could imagine. She tasted savory beef dishes in rich gravies, succulent pork with creamy sauces and roasted pheasants. Her mouth watered when she thought of butters and bisques, shellfish she'd heard of but never had, wines that might be bitter or sweet on her tongue, but she savored each because she might never have them again. She saved dessert for last, but all she could think of was butterscotch.

The rocking chair flickered in her vision. The worktable spun by in a blur. Her cupboard vanished as he whirled her around the room, dipping and gliding with the captivating sounds of the magic box. She laughed and concentrated on the man who held her, and though she wore calico and he wore homespun, she pretended his silk waistcoat brushed the tops of her breasts. But through the magic of the dance and the swell of the music, something held her fast to earth.

The scent that came from him reminded her of Kentucky winds blowing through the valley, the hardy grasses that wavered in the fields, the rich soil that lined the riverbanks, the delicate smell of the wildflowers that covered her clearing, all the scents that kept her heart alive. His body pressed to hers, she relished his scent, the feel of his hard body, the gentle murmurings of sweet nothings in her ear. She wanted more than anything to pull him closer. But there was only so close two people could get surrounded by...

She realized the music had stopped and so had they. They stood in the middle of her keeping room. Raines still stared, his eyes seemingly filled with memories, a curious smile on his face.

"Where were you?" he asked.

She sighed blissfully. She heard the sound and realized she'd been so far away she had trouble finding her way home, but the scents that filled the room drew her back.

"New York, I think," she said softly. "I've never been. There must be so much there to see, to hear. It must be magical. Where were you?"

"Right here," he said, quietly. "Watching you."

That heat flashed through her again and burned away the memory of New York. The whole city simply burst into flames and disintegrated before her eyes. All that remained was this man. "Oh." She blinked several times, trying desperately to think of something, anything to say.

He released her slowly, reluctantly. At least it felt that way. She hoped it was that way.

Billy's hand wrapped around hers and tugged. "Come, darlin'. We'll make a little magic of our own."

He led her into the bedroom, and Raines followed. In the darkness she heard the whisper of clothing as it dropped to the floor, not realizing it was her own until she stood naked. Gentle hands ran down

the length of her arms as Billy leaned in to kiss her. She opened her lips to receive his kiss, glad to be in Kentucky with these men. The dream of New York seemed a distant, hazy memory. She wrapped her arms around Billy's neck as he lowered her to the bed. She surrendered to the kiss with a sweet abandon that filled her heart with comfort and serenity. No city on earth could offer so much.

Billy's mouth teased hers, sucking on her lips. His teeth nipped at her with tiny bites that sent tingles across her limbs and made the beat of her heart quicken, sending the blood sizzling through her veins. All of it had one destination. Her pussy swelled, pulsing with a rhythm that matched her heartbeats.

Billy dipped his head and his tongue licked first one breast, then the other. She arched against him. Her voice seemed husky, desperate. "More."

His mouth circled her nipple, pressing light kisses over her skin. The nipple pebbled and rose, tingling, aching then throbbing. His tongue swept over it, and a soft moan escaped her. Her pussy clenched violently. His lips locked on her, sucking, pulling, tugging, and she had no choice. Her fingers drove into his hair and held him tighter. Her body shuddered.

He moved away, and she groaned.

He lay beside her, his head propped on his hand. He reached out and his finger lazily drew an invisible line from the hollow of her throat, over the soft skin between her breasts, down her quivering abdomen. She sucked in a breath when it moved lower and her body tensed, waiting anxiously. He continued lower until he reached her mound. His finger circled slowly through the hair there, teasing her with short strokes to the piece of her that throbbed, her clit, that tiny nub of flesh that held all her focus, that demanded something and wanted it so desperately.

When that teasing finger pressed against her and held, moving slowly, rhythmically, hypnotically, she bucked upwards, and a small cry escaped from her. The magic of it, the power of it soared through her. That such pleasure, such a feeling, could pour through her amazed and thrilled her. It held so much more than an imaginary world filled with things that had nothing to do with her life. This was her life. This was so much better than pretend.

The pleasure, the tension, the perfection ripped through her and when it crested, her pussy spasmed, her clit throbbed, and her back bowed upward. Her body shivered with pinpricks of sensation that enveloped her in an endless wave of mind-numbing ecstasy. She plunged over the edge, dove into the sweet, satiating waters of pleasure, and let herself drown in the sensations that poured and swelled through her. When she collapsed back to the bed, she fell into a blissful state of exhausted and welcome contentment.

Her eyelids fluttered for a few moments, unwilling and unable to open, but finally did. Billy smiled beside her, his hand gently caressing her arm. It tickled, but she didn't mind. Her entire body seemed to tickle now. She smiled back then suddenly realized they were alone on the bed. She struggled to rise up to her elbows. It seemed an impossible task.

Raines' dark, shadowed face peered at her from above, unreadable, captivating in its stillness.

"Where were you?" she asked.

The tone of his voice sent a shiver rushing over her spine. "Right here. Watching you."

She had no idea what to say, so for perhaps for the second time in her life she kept quiet. Billy tugged at the blanket, and she scooted, allowing him to pull it down. She scurried underneath, pulling the covers up to her chin. The men quietly shed their clothes and soon their warm bodies nestled against her. She sighed, too tired to wonder what Raines had thought about while he watched her. She closed her eyes and settled into the warm comfort of their presence.

Chapter 7

A low moan woke her. She sat up in the bed and listened. Lying on his back, Billy snored softly, and Raines lay quietly, his arm draped across her lap. She stared into the darkness of the room. When she heard the sound again, she glanced at the open window. Very carefully she removed Raines' arm, then scooted backwards until she had cleared the blanket. Sleeping with two men had inherent complications and getting out of bed without disturbing them seemed one of them. She made her way to the bottom of the bed. After pulling on her dress, she stepped into her shoes.

Once out of the bedroom, she located a lantern, lit it with some embers from the hearth and slipped out the door. The shadows moving toward the barn told her she had company, and the quiet groans drifting through the night told her she had trouble.

She followed the shadows and slid through the opening in the barn door behind them. Eleven people—five men, three women and three children younger than Martin. Two of the men carried a third between them on a makeshift litter made from branches and a hunk of dirty blanket. When the men gingerly placed the litter on the floor, the disturbance roused the semi-conscious man. He thrashed for a moment and opened his mouth to scream. Her breath locked in her throat, Jessie watched as one of his bearers pressed an open palm across his mouth and held a finger to his lips. The injured man immediately calmed and nodded. Within another moment, he slipped into unconsciousness.

Though they'd already been told the layout of the barn at their last station, Jessie quickly directed the women to the food cache. The three, dirty and exhausted, led the children to the back of the barn while Jessie stood near the door with the men. She held the lantern as close as she could and inspected the damage to the injured man's leg. Questions weren't necessary. Whatever had happened had been bad. His left shin was shattered and a splintered hunk of bone jutted through his dark skin.

Bile rose to the back of her throat at the stench that wafted from the injury. Spatters of blood still smeared his skin but most of the bleeding had stopped. Gore and bits of bone fragment stuck to his flesh, and pus oozed from the injury.

"How long ago?" Jessie asked.

"Happened last night, miss," the biggest man said. "Man came after me. Thomas jumped in front of a sledgehammer. After that, I—"

She nodded, her attention locked on the horrible task ahead.

"I don't need to know what you did." She swallowed hard. "I need some cloths, some water and the medical kit out of the storage cache. Will one of you get it please? I don't really think it will help, but I'll do what I can."

The big man nodded and went to the back of the barn, returning with everything she needed and set it all by the litter. He ran a hand over his bald head then dropped to the floor, his head in his hands.

"Don't know what to do, miss. I shouldn't'a brought him here, but Thomas and me, we—"

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I know. You made the right choice. We'll do what we can."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, biting hard. This injury went beyond her meager skills. She'd stitched a few open wounds, set a dislocated shoulder and even removed a bullet from a man's thigh, but the mess she saw before her opened another realm of pain and complications. Her mind tumbled as she thought of anything she might be capable of doing to help. She knelt beside the litter and pulled the medical kit closer.

She doused a cloth and began the arduous process of wiping the wound to see exactly what she dealt with. Clearing away the blood did nothing to increase her faith she'd be able to help this man. As she exposed the gruesome injury, her heart sank further. She sat back on her heels, listening to the moans of pain and watching him grimace even in the throes of unconsciousness. She had no idea where to start. She thought the leg would need to be amputated, and to do that his friends would be forced to leave him behind. She could transport him into the village and possibly save his life, but he'd lose his bid at freedom.

She continued to wipe the blood leaking from the wound as she inspected the injury more closely. If she could get the bone back through the tissue, she thought maybe ... What she wouldn't give for a doctor, a surgeon. She raised her head to speak to the man's friend as the door to the barn opened. The blood roared through her veins and caused her heart to thud. It took every ounce of courage she had to turn her head.

Raines strode into the barn, carrying a case, and Billy fell back against the door, slamming it closed. Her heart lurched in her chest, and then hammered with a beat that might kill her. She lurched to her feet and planted her body in front of Thomas. The men behind her took cautious steps back. She heard their feet sliding on the boards. But the big man rose and came to stand next to her. His heat shimmered around her, and she smelled his sweat. The sounds of frantic movement came from the back of the barn.

Someone is going to get killed here.

She took a step toward Raines and Billy. "Get out."

Raines paused, eyeing her curiously. He held up his hand. "I can help."

Her mind reeled. Too many people. She'd never get them through the trap door before someone got hurt, not with two men to deal with. Her hand skimmed her pocket, though she knew the pistol lay on the dresser in the bedroom. How could she have forgotten to bring the shotgun out with her? It was second nature.

Her glance darted frantically around the dark interior, mentally searching for anything that would serve as a weapon, but she'd cleared everything out months ago.

What am I going to do now?

Raines took another step. She plunged her hand in her pocket, hoping he'd believe her ruse. His glance shot to her skirt. "I'm a doctor."

She curled her hand into a fist. "Prove it."

He held out a wooden case, slid open the catches and lifted the lid. He removed a small tray. Jessie swallowed as she stared at the contents—metal instruments of all sizes and descriptions, a saw, a chain. Everything looked extremely dangerous and very scary. She could barely find her voice. She allowed herself a moment of hope, though she knew it might be the wrong thing to do. If something went wrong, she might be able to get her hands on one of those sharp, pointy objects.

"Can you help him?" She gestured to the man on the floor.

"Yes."

She lifted her chin and stepped aside, but kept her hand in her pocket, throwing out her challenge. "Then do it."

Raines hunkered down, placed the box on the floor and grabbed the lantern, holding it over the man's leg. Billy shuffled closer, his hair standing in wild spikes, his face sleepy and white. He leaned over, peered at the wound, then wobbled slightly and dropped to the floor. Beads of sweat dotted his brow as his head drooped into his hands.

"I can't do it, Cutter."

Raines dumped some water into his cupped palm and swished it over his hands. He dumped more water then flicked his wrists. Droplets sparkled in the glow of the lantern.

"If you're going to be sick, move away." His fingers prodded and pried into the wound. Raines glanced at Jessie and gave her an amused smile. "He can't stand the sight of blood. You, on the other hand, seem to be doing pretty well."

He poked his finger into the wound again, twisting under bone. Jessie heart flipped listening to the squishy noises and watching half of the man's bone lift out of his body.

Raines glanced up. "Mrs. McGee, take your hand out of that empty pocket and get down here and help me."

Jessie dropped to her knees. She glanced up as Billy crawled into the corner and puked into a pile of straw. She thought about joining him. He rolled onto his back, staring at the rafters, and pulled in deep breaths. His chest rose and fell, rose and fell. When he moaned and rolled toward the pile of straw again, Jessie blinked, and for a moment wondered if she was in the throes of a nightmare. The roiling in her stomach signaled she might be awake, and the agonized moan pouring from Thomas's bloodless lips proved reality.

Raines leaned closer to the wound and sniffed deeply. Her stomach lurched just watching him. He lifted his face. "Seen anything like this before?"

Jessie shook her head violently and the tangles of her hair swept the side of her face. She yanked it away and twisted it into a knot at the nape of her neck.

Raines continued his inspection. "Did a nice job of cleaning it up, but we're gonna need a lot more water." He nodded to the baldheaded man, who scrambled to the back of the barn to fetch the water. He turned back to Jessie. "I'm going to need your help on this. Obviously, Billy's out of this one."

He glanced at his friend who now angled into the pile of straw on his hands and knees, spitting. "For Christ's sake, Billy, take it outside. We don't need to listen to that Godawful noise."

Billy's pale face lifted, and he blinked. "Sorry, Cutter. Was trying to be supportive."

"I have all the support I need." He glanced toward Jessie, and his brows rose. She nodded, at least she thought she did. She felt like the dream had spiraled out of control. He turned back to Billy, who struggled to his feet. "Get in the house and find me the cleanest towels, shirts, anything you can. Find me some more light, lanterns, candles, I don't give a damn but find it and— Oh, no, don't you start that bloody puking again, Billy. Stand up straight."

Billy rose to his full height and sucked in a deep breath. He ran his hands over his face, his gaze darting frantically around the dark barn, anywhere but to the man on the litter. "Cloth, candles, got it."

Jessie wiped at the trickle of blood that oozed down Thomas's leg. Raines shook his head. "Don't waste your time." He grabbed the water jug and leaned over the unconscious man, slowly pouring streams of water onto the wound. He handed Jessie the jug. "Like that. Just keep irrigating it."

She steadied the jug and poured, watching a pool of red trickle into a thin pink stream as the blood flowed down the leg and puddled in the blanket.

Raines pulled the wooden box closer as he glanced back at Billy, reminding him, "Candles first. Then take a couple of these men and find me some boards, the straightest ones you can find, and some rope, preferably thin." Billy mumbled something as he yanked on the barn door. Raines glanced at him then went back to work. "You complaining, Billy?"

Billy barked a laugh that sound sickening. "You're turning into Captain Ahab, Cutter. You know that?"

"Yeah, Billy, I know that. Now get your ass going and do what I said."

Billy laughed again, this time in a more normal Billy-like way. Jessie continued to pour, her mind whirling.

"You're really a doctor?"

"Surgeon." Without taking his eyes off her, his fingers dipped inside the box, and he withdrew a small dark bottle. He nodded at her dress. "I'm going to need a piece of cloth."

Jessie blinked, unsure of what he wanted and finally her brain focused. With unsteady hands, she put the jug on the floor and tore a small hunk from the hem of her dress and handed it to him.

"Is that why Billy calls you Cutter?"

Raines frowned for a moment, then glanced up and laughed. "Oh, no. Funny, though. He'd like to have credit for that. My mother was Abigail Cutter of the Boston Cutters."

"Congratulations," Jessie said with a smile. She shook her head. "That means nothing to me."

"No, I suppose not. I sometimes forget where I am. The Cutters built ships, the best in New England, possibly the whole country. Had a reputation as good as gold. Or they did till my father got hold of the company. No one ever said Hamilton Raines couldn't make money, but they also never said he had a conscience."

"You don't get along with your father?"

Raines wiped a sleeve across his face. "No, Mrs. McGee, I do not. And once I found out how he'd increased the fortune he dangled in front of me like a prize, I left Boston and—" He stared at the cloth in his hand and snapped his mouth closed. "I need you to wake him up."

Jessie's gaze roamed over the man's sweaty dark face. "He's unconscious."

Raines leaned forward and thumbed the man's eyelid. "He has to take a deep breath of this or it's not going to work." He glanced at the bald man, who watched with horrible fascination, his eyes wide and stark in the gloom. "What's your name?"

The man's whispered voice was unsteady. "Caleb."

"Well, Caleb, I need your help. You've got to wake this man long enough for me to knock him back out. Think you can do that?"

Caleb looked doubtful but knelt over his friend and put a hand on his shoulder, shaking gently. "Thomas." The other man groaned and his eyes fluttered beneath the thin lids. Caleb's big hands wrapped around his friend's face. He leaned down and pressed his lips against the man's ear. "Thomas, wake up. Mary needs you."

Thomas's eyes snapped open. Dazed, his lids fluttered until his eyes locked on the big face leaning over him. "Mary?"

Caleb glanced toward the huddle of women and children at the back of the barn, lingering on a little girl of about eight, who slept fitfully in the cradling arms of one of the women.

"Mary needs you to get better, Thomas. So you can get her across the river. Do what this man says." Caleb nodded at Raines, who moved closer.

"Thomas." Raines waited until the dark eyes focused on him. "When I put this cloth over your nose, I need you to take some deep breaths. You're going to want to fight it, but don't." He clasped the man's shoulder and squeezed. "And then I want you to trust me. Think you can do that?"

Thomas's swallow stuck in his throat. He coughed. His eyelids fluttered with exhaustion, but he nodded. Jessie watched as Raines lay the cloth over the man's nose, then pulled the cork from the bottle and dropped several splashes onto the cloth.

"Now breathe deep."

Caleb cradled Thomas's face in his hands. Thomas clenched his fists and pulled in a ragged breath. One, two then three breaths. His last breath ended on a heavy, shuddering exhale and his head lolled to the side in Caleb's hands. Raines pushed the cork back into the bottle and handed it to Jessie, along with the cloth. He drew back, mumbling as he searched his surgical kit.

"Where's Goddamned Billy? I need that fucking light." Jessie pulled the lantern closer. He gave her a quick glance. "We don't have much time. The chloroform doesn't last long, and I can't afford to give him too much because it's dangerous. I'm going to work as fast as I can, but I want you to be ready. If I tell you to give him more, do it quickly. Caleb, hold him down if he moves."

Jessie and Caleb nodded. Thomas bucked, his body convulsing on the blanket. She cried out, nearly dropping the bottle as Caleb pinned Thomas's shoulders to the floorboards. The man moaned, deep in his throat, a sound of twisted agony. His arms thrashed wildly, slapping at them as they struggled to hold him still.

"I should have warned you," Raines said. "That's normal. They all do that. But don't worry, as long as it lasts, he won't feel a thing. Hold him, Caleb and you," he nodded toward another man who had rushed forward, "you hold down this other leg."

A slender man dropped to the floor and grabbed Thomas's uninjured ankle.

Jessie picked up the jug and poured a small amount of water over the wound as Raines inspected it. The door opened and Billy rushed in, a lantern looped over his arm, carrying a pile of cloth and a handful of candles. He immediately dropped the towels on the floor and began to light the candles, handing them to the two other men hovering around the improvised surgery. Raines pulled a metal file out of the box as the men moved closer and hunkered down.

"I already found the boards," Billy said. "Looks like Rob had been planning to make repairs. They're right outside."

"Thanks, Billy, now get the hell out."

Billy glanced at the man on the floor, gagged then lifted his face to the rafters as his face paled. "Can I go to the back and check on the kids?"

"Sure, Billy. Take Jessie's little kit and make sure they're okay."

Billy nodded, his hair falling into his face. He raced away as fast as he could.

"Billy has a soft spot for kids," Raines said, peering into the hole in the man's leg. "Show him a kid, and that man turns to mush."

"Billy's very sweet," she said softly.

"And a pain in my ass. A little water." He paused as she poured several drops. "Yeah, right there. You've got good instincts. Ever thought of being a surgical nurse?"

Surprised, Jessie's face lifted. "Oh, no. Farming's hard enough. And this is ..." She swallowed and took a deep breath, shuddering. "A little sickening. I've never seen anything like this."

"You're doing fine." Raines angled the small file into the flesh of the man's leg. Against her better judgment, Jessie leaned closer. She wanted to learn everything Raines could teach her. As if sensing that, he explained what he was doing. "I'm going to file away the rough edges. The bone has a better chance of healing if I do that. Gives a smoother surface for new growth. Less pain later. If he makes it, that is. I can't really guarantee that."

Jessie stared at the mangled flesh and the jagged edges of the bone as he worked. Each movement of the file grated on every nerve in her body, causing a shiver to rush up her spine. She leaned closer. "You're not going to amputate?"

"No, I've done this a few times. Had a pretty high success rate. At least as high as you can get given the circumstances."

Jessie snuck a peek at his face. "Where did you learn to do this?"

"Massachusetts General. Since I left there—" He angled the file and sawed harder, though his fingers moved with tight precision. Thomas groaned and Caleb made a strangled sound in his throat, the sweat glistening on his forehead as he held his friend tight. "Well, I've been through all levels of hell. Shiloh most recently, then I got the fuck out."

He must have heard her quick, indrawn breath because he glanced up.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Jessie nodded and blinked back sudden tears. "My husband was at Shiloh." Her whispered voice made Raines pause and lift his head.

"McGee." His brow furrowed and he nodded. His bloody hands hovered for a moment then furiously went back to work. "Sure. Frank."

She gasped. She couldn't remember having told them Frank's name. "Yes. Frank."

"Gutshot. Lasted a long time." He studied the wound and went back to sawing. She brushed at the tear on her cheek. "Brave man. There wasn't much I could do for him. You should be proud."

"I am proud," she whispered.

"Good."

He wiped the file on his pants and settled it on the edge of the box. As he reached into his box again, she laid her hand over his. His head snapped up.

"Thank you," she said.

"It was my job. And one that wasn't always successful."

She leaned closer, cupping his face in her hand and kissed his lips softly, then smoothed some hair away from his brow.

His midnight blue eyes blinked in confusion. "What was that for?"

"For taking care of him. For telling me. We weren't together for very long, but he was a good man, and I'm glad someone knows it besides me."

Raines selected a tiny brush from his box and briskly swiped it across the bone. He nodded. "You're welcome then. Pour. Try to get rid of that dust. And, fellows, bring those candles a little closer." He nodded at the box. "There's silk in there. And scissors. Get them ready. I've got to close off these bleeders."

Jessie lunged toward the box and dug inside looking for the silk thread while he took a pair of tweezers and picked bits of bone from the wound. The sight of each bloody piece made her sick to her stomach, but she felt compelled to watch, to be a part of this thing he did for her. When she found the spool of silk, she handed it to him.

"Grab those forceps." Her hand hovered frantically for a moment then she latched onto something by instinct. He gave her a quick smile. "Good choice. Exactly what I would have chosen. Put them right here." She adjusted them near his finger, and he began to tie off tiny hunks of flesh, telling her to cut at various intervals.

"Vessels, arteries," he said. "The capillaries will heal themselves. Nothing major is damaged. This is a lucky man." "Lucky?"

"The break doesn't expose the marrow. That increases his chances." Raines sat back on his haunches. "And he hasn't bled to death yet. Always a good sign. Now for the hard part."

"The hard part?" Jessie squeaked.

Raines nodded at Caleb. "You're going to have to prove your mettle here, my friend. I've got to set this bone, and he's not going to like it. Hold him tight around the shoulders and when I tell you to yank, you yank. Don't worry about hurting him. You're doing him a favor, and if it works out, he may heal. Yank as hard as you can. Nothing prissy, mind you." He glanced at Caleb's gigantic arms and the hands that gathered and held Thomas's shoulders.

Caleb offered a weak smile. "No, sir. Nothing prissy."

"Jessie. Get the needle ready. Thread it for me. I've got sewing to do."

Jessie grabbed the silk and threaded as fast as she could, damning her less-than-perfect domestic skills. She vowed, when this war ended and things got back to normal, all of her skills would improve. Raines moved to position himself near Thomas's feet. He gripped the man's foot and gently twisted his injured leg until it was as straight as he could get it. Jessie watched in horrible fascination.

"Jessie, back away for a minute," he said quietly. "Then get ready with the water. Hopefully everything will hold, but I can't guarantee it."

She scooted back as his hands locked tighter around Thomas's ankle.

"Get ready, Caleb." His fingers gripped harder. He gave a curt nod. "Now."

Both men yanked at the same time. A sickening sound filled the barn, a soft crunch that made the bile rise in Jessie's throat. Thomas screamed and bucked. His eyes shot open, rolling wildly in their sockets. Raines held tightly to Thomas's leg. Caleb's head dropped to his chest, but he kept his grip on his friend's shoulders. A woman's

scream wound through the barn, and several of the children started to cry.

"Jessie, the chloroform. Just a drop."

Jessie scurried forward and put the cloth over Thomas's nose. Her hands shook as she struggled to get the cork out of the bottle. She shakily poured a small drop onto the cloth. Thomas thrashed for a moment against Caleb's hands, arching his back, then took a huge breath and collapsed back against the litter. She released a shuddering breath and ran her hand down the man's arm, wanting to offer comfort but not knowing how.

"Bring the lantern closer," Raines said.

Jessie held the lantern near the side of the man's leg. Raines took an instrument and poked at the wound, studying his work. At one point he poured more water, then took the tweezers and removed another shard of bone. More water. More prodding. He filed the bone, brushed it, poured more water. Shivers ran up her spine and Jessie held her breath each time she heard the raspy sound of sawed bone. Finally Raines sat back.

"Now for the easy part."

Jessie breathed a sigh of relief until he began to gather up flaps of peeling flesh and tug them over the wound. He reached out, and she handed him the needle.

"Get another ready. It's going to take a lot of stitches."

She nodded and set to work, glad to have something to take her attention, but her shaky hands fumbled. Caleb released his death-grip on Thomas's shoulders and slumped forward. He sat down and held his friend's head in his lap. Raines worked for nearly an hour, tugging the gaping flesh, closing the hole in the man's leg with the skill of an expert seamstress. At intervals, Jessie gave Thomas several more drops of chloroform at Raines' direction. When Raines finished, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his shirt, then held out his hands. Jessie poured water over them. He grabbed a cloth and nodded at the sutured leg.

"Pour a lot of water on there and dry it." He pulled a few packets out of his pocket, sprinkling various herbs into another cloth. He crumbled them and held out the cloth. Jessie poured a small amount of water, and Raines stirred with his finger, creating a paste. "Medicine's a little hard to come by right now. Gotta make do with what I can find and hope for the best."

She couldn't take her eyes off the cloth. It seemed a miracle to her. This *man* seemed like a miracle to her. "You're lucky to know what you're looking for."

Raines tilted his head, a perplexed look on his face. "I can teach you what to look for if you like."

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "Thank you."

He laid the cloth over the wound, then tore another towel into strips and wrapped them around the man's leg. He began to gather up his instruments, dousing each with water, drying them and putting them back in the box. "Not a lot more I can do. Caleb, why don't you go check on your flock and get some rest? You did great."

Caleb looked doubtful for a moment, but nodded and gently moved Thomas off his lap. He stood and plodded to the back of the barn.

"Billy!"

Billy murmured something to someone then trotted forward. He leaned over and said, "Nice job, Cutter."

"Thanks."

Billy nodded. "Fixed up the kids. They had a couple scrapes."

"Thanks, Billy. Now take a couple of these men and go saw those boards to fit. The faster I get them on, the better."

"Sure thing, Cutter." He motioned to two of the men, eyed Thomas's leg then headed outside.

Raines continued to rip cloth into strips.

"What do we do now?" Jessie asked.

"We wait," Raines said. "If he lives through tomorrow night, he'll probably make it."

Focused on Thomas's still face, Jessie jerked as Raines' warm fingers wrapped around her wrist. He ran a damp cloth over her knuckles.

"You have blood on your hands."

"So do you, Mr. Raines."

"But I'm used to it," Raines said. "And it's not always been in a good cause."

Jessie watched the large hand as it gently traced the cloth over her fingers, her palm. "I find that hard to believe."

A small smile flickered across his lips. It vanished just as quickly. His gaze lifted to hers. "I'm not a nice man, Mrs. McGee. At least not anymore."

"You seem nice enough to me," she said quietly.

He stared toward the back of the barn at the shadows settling down for a rough, stressful night. "I can seem to be a lot of things. I've done some things, the kinds of things a woman like you would never understand." A bark of laughter shot from his mouth. "Let's just say Billy isn't here to play the fool."

"He's with you to defuse situations. To keep you in check."

His hand stilled, and he cocked his head. His quiet voice wrapped around her, causing her heart to skip a beat. "Are you always this intuitive, Mrs. McGee?"

She pulled her hand away from his before she did something stupid. Something about this man wasn't good for her. "Not always. But I can feel the danger inside you. I think you're a man with nothing left to lose. That can lead to recklessness. I don't think you care any longer what happens to you."

His mouth curled in a slight smile. "I'm beginning to. And that scares me more than the things I've done."

The barn door clattered as Billy wedged through the opening carrying two thin boards and a hunk of twine. He'd obviously been searching through her pantry. When he dropped down beside them, Jessie saw a smear of jam on his lip. She leaned forward, swiped her finger across it then stuck her finger in her mouth.

Billy ducked his head. "Couldn't resist."

Jessie smiled. "Neither could I."

As the tired men filed past and joined their group, Raines took one of the boards and laid it against Thomas's leg. "Nice job, Billy. Perfect fit. You've got a good eye."

"Thanks, Cutter. Needed to redeem myself for the puking."

"Keep this up and there might be another job for you after this damn war is over. Might be some money in it for you." He flashed a smile. "Billy likes money."

"Who doesn't?" Jessie asked.

"As much as I'd like to talk about money all night," Billy said, "can we finish fixing up this poor sod then go back in the house and fuck? It's been a long night."

"Clean up your puke first, Billy."

Billy headed to the straw pile, muttering, "Thinks we're on the fucking *Pequod*."

* * * *

Raines laid the medical kit on the table. Exhaustion nearly overwhelmed him. He'd been more tired but dealing with Billy's bouncing, nervous energy would be the death of him. He watched as his friend cleaned up in the basin, scrubbing to rid himself of the stench of blood he hadn't even touched, as though the smell alone left stains. There was never any explanation to Billy's behaviors. He barreled through life, making his own rules, living his own little obsessions. Raines knew about obsessions, but Billy's sometimes seemed groundless, as though he'd plucked them from thin air.

Raines knew scrubbing wouldn't be enough for his skin. Nothing short of scraping it off would ever entirely remove the stains he'd gotten over the years. They might be outwardly invisible, but he felt

them all the way to his soul, an affliction that bound him to death, destruction, chaos.

Billy rinsed and spit, rinsed and spit, as though emptying his body of every foul taste he'd ever known. He hated to puke.

"Christ, Billy, how many times can you do that?"

Billy swished another mouthful of water, followed by the inevitable spit. "As many as it takes. Got a problem, Cutter?"

"No," he muttered. "What kinds of problems could I possibly have?"

The smell of blood permeated every inch of fabric in his clothing and lingered in every pore of his body. He yanked off his boots, sorry to see the clods of dirt that dropped to the floor. He stripped everything off and let each garment drift to its own destination. He combed his fingers through his hair, pulling it back from his face.

"Finish up," he barked. "And get rid of that disgusting mess."

Jesus Christ. He hoped that man lived till morning. Should he have amputated? Might have been the wisest course, but he knew he was right about the marrow. The chance of infection remained but he had a much better chance with the way the fracture had angled. The lack of proper medication sure as hell didn't help. Surgeries offered enough complications without having to work in the dark in a Goddamned *barn*.

"You're gonna need more than the basin, Cutter. I can smell you from here."

"Fuck you, Billy. It's not me, it's the clothes."

He leaned down and raked them into his arms, feeling the cold, tacky sensation of congealed blood against his bare skin. He hurled them into the hearth, where the fire licked at the fabric, sizzling and sparking as it lapped up pieces of someone's life. He turned, hands on hips, daring Billy to say another word.

"Happy now?"

"Happy as a lark." Billy frowned. "Or a clam. Which is it? And why would a clam even be happy? Christ, they're just food." He sniffed tentatively.

"Want me to throw my boots in the fire too?"

Billy toed them, eyeing them doubtfully, then smiled. "No need. I think they're okay." He glanced out the window. "Jessie's out at the water pump. Get out there and help her. And come back clean."

He grabbed a bar of soap and shoved it into Raines' hand. Raines sighed and headed for the door.

Jessie had already pumped a bucket of water and begun scouring her hands. When his bare feet crunched over the gravel, he winced, and she looked up. Her eyes widened, and it crossed his mind then that he stood naked in her dooryard. She simply stared, her gaze traveling slowly down his entire body, almost squinting to see him better in the dark. She licked her lips and tugged her lower lip between her teeth. He heard a gulp.

"Need some of this?" He held up the soap and she plucked it from his fingers.

"I need about ten of these. I've never felt so ..."

"Disgusting?"

She smoothed the soap over her skin. He could tell she tried hard not to stare at his body but he could feel her gaze in the darkness.

"No, it's not that. I feel like my skin's been stained with something I'll never remove, like it's become a part of me, like somehow I've absorbed a part of that man." She glanced up and laughed. "That probably sounds crazy."

He shook his head.

"It doesn't really bother me," she said quietly. "But I don't feel I deserve to keep it. It's his pain, his horror, not mine."

"But you helped him deal with it. So that feeling rightfully belongs to you now. Not many people would have done what you did. It takes—"

She shrugged, a gentle lifting of one shoulder that rendered him speechless. "Maybe not. But I don't feel special because of it. I feel," she glanced at him shyly, "kind of privileged. Does that make any sense at all?"

He nodded.

She plunged her hands in the bucket, rinsing them thoroughly. She splashed water on her face, scrubbing viciously. "Still. I don't exactly want to wear his blood to bed." She lifted her face and damp tendrils of hair drifted around her cheeks as she tilted her head and studied him with a soft smile. "You amazed me tonight."

He smiled back. "'Cause I'm amazing?"

She cocked her hip. "Yes, Doctor Raines, because you're amazing."

She bent down suddenly and lifted the bucket. Before he could move or think what she meant to do, she heaved the contents at him, drenching him in frigid water that drilled against his skin like a thousand needles.

He clenched his jaw against the scream that threatened to burst out of his mouth. His eyes narrowed, and she backed up a step, giggling.

"You little witch," he growled.

He lunged and swept her up, crushing her against his chest. Her soft breasts pressed against him, their nipples hardening beneath her dress as they touched his icy skin. She kicked a little, but not too hard. She seemed to like it in his arms, though he vaguely wondered why. Her hands touched his shoulders and her nails dug into his flesh. Just a little, not enough to hurt, but to let him know they were both alive.

"You, Mrs. McGee, are a handful," he snarled.

"And you, Doctor Raines, are ..."

Her gaze dropped from his eyes to his mouth. Her hands left his shoulders and slowly her fingers traced over his neck and up to cup his face. Her lips touched his tentatively, a soft press he felt all the way to his bones, then her lips parted and covered his mouth with a greed that stunned him, smashing against his, crushing with a force

her small body shouldn't possess. Her hands tightened against his face and she tilted her head, her tongue pushing between his lips and into his mouth and driving every thought out of his head. She tasted every inch of him, soft sounds humming in her throat, and when she finally pulled away, she pressed tender kisses on his lips, his cheeks, his jaw. She peered into his eyes and gave him one more kiss on the mouth.

He could do nothing but stare. "Was that another thank you?"

"No, that was for me. Because I wanted to."

She slid down his body, and he reluctantly released her. She leaned down then pressed the soap into his hand.

"Don't take too long."

She headed back to the house, her hips swaying with an innocent rhythmic grace that nearly undid him. He rubbed the soap over his body, ignoring the cock that had hardened without his permission then pumped more water into the bucket. When he'd soaped and rinsed twice, he climbed the steps to the house.

Inside the bedroom, Jessie and Billy both slept, curled and entwined like the lovers they were. He lay down beside them, listening to their breaths for a moment, thinking of nothing and everything and wondering when he'd last felt a kiss all the way to his bones.

Jessie murmured and turned to him, her arm sliding over his chest, then moving down his body with caressing strokes.

He had a hard time finding his voice. "Thought you were sleeping."

"I was waiting for you. Did you want to sleep?"

He chuckled. "Not especially."

She wrapped her hand around his cock, already twitching in anticipation. "I didn't think so."

She tugged and pulled, her cool hand coaxing his tired body into a quick arousal. His cock swelled and pulsed with the rhythm of her hand, and his balls tightened with excruciating pressure. He tried to shake off the stress of the night and forget the horror that seemed a

normal part of his existence. He concentrated on this woman and the talent of her hand. For a practically virginal woman, she'd learned pretty fast.

"You scared me tonight," she whispered.

So much for forgetting.

"Didn't mean to."

"You didn't seem surprised to find them in the barn."

"I wasn't."

She moved her hand lower, cupping his balls and squeezing gently. "It made me realize how vulnerable my entire operation is. I've known how dangerous it is, but... I'm going to have to do some thinking."

He laughed, but it caught in his throat as her fingernails scraped over his balls then traced up his cock. "A real weapon would come in handy."

She nodded against his shoulder. "I wasn't thinking clearly tonight. I seem to have lost my sense of responsibility lately."

"Not possible." He took a deep breath as her hand curled around him again. "You're the most responsible woman I know."

She sat up and swung her leg over his thigh. She planted her hands on his chest, her fingers threading through the hair and tugging gently. She nestled her pussy against his crotch. Her moisture coated his skin. She leaned closer, and her hair spread across his chest.

"You feel so nice," she whispered. "I never knew a man could feel so nice."

"Prove it."

She rose slightly and lowered herself down on his cock. He gritted his teeth at the pleasure that ground through him. He'd forgotten what a woman's body felt like. Her muscles clenched around him, tightening, squeezing him, enveloping him in incredible wet warmth. He curled his hands around her hips, pulling her closer. She nestled against him. They fit together perfectly.

"I'd forgotten a woman could feel so nice."

"Seems a shame to forget something like that, Mr. Raines."

She moved slowly, rocking her hips against him. He lay quietly, enjoying the strain of her muscles beneath his hands, the glossy hair that skimmed across his skin, the soft sounds that passed her lips. Her breathing quickened, and when he moved his hands to her thighs to touch the tender skin between her legs, her pulse beat rapidly under his fingers.

Her movements became more purposeful, and his body tensed. His cock pulsed, threatening to explode. He waited in agony for her, watching her face, feeling the slight ripples beneath her skin. When she threw back her head and her body shuddered, he let himself go, spilling into her with a force that stole his breath. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her down against him, wrapping his arms around her back.

She laughed against his shoulder, and her lips pressed against his pulse in a gentle kiss. He struggled to find his breath.

"You really like this, don't you?" he asked.

She sighed, and her soft breath fanned his neck. "You have no idea."

Billy's muttered voice drifted over them. "I'm trying to fucking sleep here. Think about other people for a change."

"We'll think about you tomorrow, Billy," he said.

"Make sure you do."

His snores soon filled the room again. Raines gathered Jessie against him and smiled when her leg wrapped around his.

Chapter 8

Raines watched as Jessie set the mugs on the table and began to pace around the room. An inquisition would follow. He could tell by the look on her face. She'd been quiet for far too long this morning. Only the sound of Billy tapping on the table with a spoon followed her footsteps. She swept back the curtain revealing a day filled with fluffy autumn clouds.

"Thomas is well this morning?"

"He's alive. Conscious. No fever. I gave him a bit of pain killer though it probably isn't enough. He's a tough man."

"Good." She dropped the curtain, swung toward them and said it. "I want to know some things."

Billy stopped drumming. "We can't tell you anything."

"You damn well can. I think we're involved in the same sort of business. I've been a nervous wreck the last few days and—"

Raines swept the hair away from his brow and stared at the ceiling for a moment. "You're always a nervous wreck, Mrs. McGee, but it doesn't stand in your way. You handled yourself with skill last night. A damn sight better than Billy here, and he's seen worse. From what I've seen, you're doing an impressive job here."

She huffed and went back to staring out the window. "It would be a lot easier with honesty."

Billy resumed his tapping. "Honesty can get you hanged."

She spoke to them over her shoulder, but Raines noticed the determination and irritation in her face. Her mouth had drawn into that pouty, kissable frown. "I think that depends on who you're being honest with. I'm not going to spill your secrets."

"Not intentionally," Raines said.

Jessie turned from the casement. "What does that mean?"

Raines took a sip of coffee and sighed. It was the best damn coffee he'd had since leaving Boston. She might not be a great cook, or a great laundress, but she had the skills of a surgical nurse and made a damn fine cup of coffee. He wondered how she'd gotten hold of it, though he suspected Jessie McGee had her ways. "It means you have people to protect—Martin, Jane, Rob, possibly others. You're a collector of people. I'll bet people all over this county worship the ground you walk on and count on you for things. Possibly farther-reaching than the county."

"Ha! The people who matter in this county wish I'd fall off the face of the earth."

Billy leaned forward and folded his arms on the table. "We're not talking about those people."

She dropped into a chair, refusing to look at them. She toyed with the handle of the mug. "There are people."

"And you'd protect any one of those people," Billy said, "even it meant telling something you never meant to tell, especially if you thought the risk was low. We're not criticizing you for that, Jessie, but there is no low risk. Everything is connected."

Raines slid his hand over hers. "People who have liabilities should never know secrets. It isn't safe for those holding them. Billy and I, well, we have no liabilities, except for each other. Not exactly a complete life, but it suits us right now. We need to hold our secrets."

"Were you ever real bounty hunters?" Jessie asked.

Billy wagged his finger. "We've been a lot of different things."

Jessie cupped her chin in her hand. "I'm beginning to see that. A surgeon, Mr. Raines? And apparently a wealthy man. Cutter Shipbuilding, was it?"

Billy's auburn brows rose as he whistled. He scrubbed at his hair. "Fuck me, Cutter. That's your *name*? I thought it came from being a sawbones. You're from the Boston Cutters?"

"I'm not proud of it," Raines mumbled.

"There's more money in that family than in half of Philadelphia. Christ, they're practically a first family. What year did they come here?"

Raines groaned. "Jesus, Billy, I don't want to talk about it." Jessie leaned forward. "What year?"

He sighed. Talking about himself in general irked him and gave him a headache, but talking about his family made his pulse race, and a racing pulse irritated the hell out of him. "Sixteen-thirty-six." He realized his hands had clenched into fists. He sat back in his chair, stuffing his hands in his pockets, trying to relax.

"Practically a founding family," she said. "I'm impressed. My family didn't immigrate until 1730." She paused, then shrugged and plowed ahead. "It wasn't migration as much as an ultimatum. We've always had trouble with our tempers and Ireland apparently had enough of us. There was some bloodshed involved." Though she blushed prettily, her tone held a trace of pride in her rather dubious family heritage.

Raines smiled. "I can't imagine."

"A chip off the old block, eh, Jessie?" Billy said. "And what about you, Cutter? You're not as snooty as I'd expect coming from Boston aristocracy."

Raines' shoulders tightened. That hot anger he associated with Boston flooded through him. He struggled with the urge to stand up and leave. Instead he willed his voice steady. "It was a different family then. Now can we—"

Billy spread his hands and frowned. "You have it all, Cutter. Wealth, a place in society, reputation. What are you doing embroiled in all this when you could suck off the family teat?"

He ground out the words he'd held inside for years. "The teat is filled with poison now. And he can fucking keep all of it." The venom he heard in his voice shocked him. Jessie and Billy exchanged a rather hesitant glance then drew back.

"Your father?"

When Jessie's quiet voice reached him, he realized he'd been holding his breath. He released it in a whoosh, and a sense of calm moved through him, diffusing the heat in his face and unlocking everything he'd held inside.

"The rat bastard's ruined it all—the reputation, the heritage, the pride. My mother probably twists and turns in her grave knowing what he's done. He wasn't content to suck off the family teat. Oh, no, he had to corrupt it with his vile ideology." He took a gulp of coffee. "Hamilton Raines, an upstart from nowhere, a man with ambition, a man with a hateful soul and loathsome beliefs. Talked himself into the family, stole the love of the most perfect woman in Boston and ruined everything in the blink of an eye. But he managed to add to an already impossible fortune. Do either of you know how much money can be attained in the slave trade?"

"Oh, Cutter," Billy said. "I'd no idea."

Raines laughed. "Of course not! Do you think that's something you'd read in the newspaper?"

Jessie leaned toward him, her eyes filled with questions. He didn't have her answers. "It's illegal to import slaves."

The anxiety that had filled him transformed into something else. He needed to get this off his chest, to finally spill all the damning secrets that he'd held for so long. Fuck the consequences. "My father isn't a stupid man. Even he doesn't dare bring them here. But he knows plenty of men just like him and the world harbors many places that would turn your stomach. I know because I saw them." He drew a deep breath. "And after that, well, I walked away."

"You haven't walked away, Cutter," Billy said. "You dropped yourself further into the fray. Seems to me you decided to make a difference."

He scrubbed at his face. "One or two people at a time? What kind of difference is that, Billy?"

"It can make all the difference in the world to someone's life." Jessie waved her hand toward the door. "Like Thomas, Caleb and Mary."

She gave him a smile and with that smile he pushed his father into the past where he belonged. He felt better than he had in years. But then she turned to Billy and cocked her head, that butter-melting smile directed at him.

"And you, Billy. What secrets do you hold from whatever past life you had?"

Billy frowned, opened his mouth and snapped it closed. His gaze went to the window.

"Billy doesn't talk about that life," Raines said.

"I want to talk about it," Jessie said, leaning over to get Billy's attention. "I'm curious about you both now. I think you have far more secrets than I could ever have."

"He's trying not to be rude," Raines said. "But if you force him, I can't—"

Billy leapt to his feet and strode to the window. His hands scrubbed his hair. "I used to be a university professor."

Raines' mouth dropped open. "Jesus, Billy, I didn't know that."

"Where did you teach?" she asked.

Billy spoke quietly. "Philadelphia."

"What did you teach?"

"A little of this, a little of that. Some classics. Some literature. Theology, mostly."

Raines glanced at Jessie, who stared at Billy's stiff back. She met his eyes for a moment and Raines gave her an encouraging nod. It was more than he'd ever learned about Billy's life.

Jessie's fingers curled around her mug. "Theology. Does that mean you—"

Billy shoved away from the window. "Doesn't mean anything." He yanked open the door and stepped over the threshold. "I'm checking on Thomas."

Jessie jumped when the door slammed behind him.

"Goddamn," Raines whispered.

Jessie rounded on him with a snarl. "You encouraged me. You practically told me to ask!" She rubbed her hands across her cheeks. "Did you see his face? He looked like his best friend just died." When she started to rise, Raines put a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back down.

"Forget about that. He'll get over it. You just got more out of him in less than a minute than I've gotten in four months."

Jessie plopped back in the chair. "I can't imagine you tried very hard, Mr. Raines. You're not exactly the most communicative man I've ever met."

Heat flashed up his neck to his face. "Point taken."

"He obviously has something he can't talk about, which leads me to believe he should."

"Ha! You been spending time in Washington with Doc Winters?" He folded his arms across his chest and tilted his head. She squirmed on the chair, suddenly quiet. "How do you do that?"

Her green eyes widened with real confusion. "Do what?"

With so little sleep, she should have looked tired and drawn, but she looked as fresh-faced and innocent as a schoolgirl. Clandestine adventures put color on the cheeks of this little wildcat, and her eyes sparkled with vigor, even though he knew she had to be worn out. Or was it the sex? She'd obviously not experienced the power of sex until recently and an aura of sated sensuality hovered around her. He suddenly wanted to take her back to bed and have another moment alone with her.

He shook his head to clear it. That would be the worst possible thing he could do. He'd already fallen under her spell. She'd managed to make him talk, which added a dangerous aspect to their relationship.

Relationship? What are you thinking, Raines? Quit thinking with your little head.

Falling further under whatever spell she wove wouldn't be good for him or his mission.

He should have been suspicious of her motives, of her questions, but he wasn't. Curiosity drove Jessie McGee. She was a lover of mankind, something rare and wonderful in this horrible world he found himself trapped in. She continued to stare at him.

"Do what?" she repeated.

"You can get men to say things they'd never say to another living soul."

A pretty blush rose in her cheeks. "I don't do that."

"You do." He reached across the short distance separating them and took her hand. "And it's very charming, Mrs. McGee."

When the door burst open, he dropped her hand and lurched away, nearly falling out of his chair. Billy stood in the open doorway. He took a deep breath, hands curled into fists at his side.

"I left the university when," he closed his eyes for a moment, "my wife died in childbirth. Clarissa was a piece of my heart, something I'd searched for my entire life, and when I found her, my world became bright, beautiful, filled with things I'd barely seen before. I couldn't believe how lucky I was, how fortunate I'd been to find her. When the baby was coming, I was so blissfully consumed in happiness I must have missed something, because something went wrong. And I couldn't do anything to stop it."

Billy nearly choked on the words.

"I'll never understand it, or forgive it, or forget it. I watched the life leak from her body, helpless, angry, knowing nothing would ever be the same again. My baby daughter died too. I guess I was only meant to have so much happiness."

Raines felt a grip of pain tighten his own chest.

"My world simply," Billy spread his hands, staring at them as though they held answers, "crashed. In the blink of an eye, everything I'd ever believed in, everything I'd ever taught became nothing. Everything I'd ever loved simply vanished. I fled to Washington because I had a friend there."

"Mr. Lincoln?" Jessie asked.

Billy nodded vigorously, his hair bouncing wildly. He held up a hand to stop her endless questions. Affable, cheery Billy looked ready to jump out of his skin. Raines knew because he'd been there. "He introduced me to some people, and I joined an acting troupe. After a while even that wasn't enough. I'd decided to join up when Abe said he had other plans for me."

Jessie opened her mouth, and Billy held up a finger and winked.

"Can't talk about it." Billy closed the door and slid to the floor. He offered a weak smile. "Feels sort of good to get that off my chest. I can actually breathe. I haven't breathed in over two years."

Raines glanced at Jessie. Her fingers captured the fabric of her dress, twisting it in her fists. He thought it was time for her to get things off her chest as well, but he could wait. "Better check on my patient."

Jessie lifted her face. "No, wait. I have something to say as well."

She rose and went to the cupboard. She dug behind some canisters and pulled out a piece of wrinkled paper. It had been smoothed out and folded. She fingered it gently. Raines waited patiently while she determined how far to trust them. Finally, she held it out.

"Read this first and I'll explain."

He gently took the paper out of her hands, knowing instinctively it was precious to her. He read for a moment then glanced up. Her eyes shimmered with anxiety and possibly a bit of fear. Even after his surgery on a runaway slave, his admittance to knowing a Union soldier, Billy's presumed association with the President of the United States, she had no reason to trust them. Loyalties shifted with the wind in Kentucky, and other border states as well. He'd seen more than one man change his tune in the middle of a song.

Jessie McGee possessed a heart and will stronger than most. She had a stance, and she held it whether the wind caressed her with the

warmth of a summer breeze or tore her to shreds with hurricane force. He admired that. It might be the only thing they had in common besides Thomas's blood, but he'd take it. Her eyes shifted and locked on his. She was prepared to take whatever fate held for her as she put her trust on the table. Billy came to stand behind him, reading over his shoulder.

Jessie paced around them, her skirt swirling with her movements. "It's my father's will. When I went home—" She waved her hand. "That doesn't matter. It's the reason I need your help."

"Your father is Jacob Travers?" Billy asked.

"Was Jacob Travers." A glistening of tears sparkled in her eyes.

Raines took hold of her arm, stopping her pacing. "So he's dead?"

When she nodded, he stood and put the page in the pocket of his trousers. His hand slid down the length of her arm. He lifted her hand and turned it over. He dropped a tender kiss on her palm, feeling the warmth of her skin. She shivered slightly. She struggled to breathe, drawing in a raspy breath.

He lifted his head. "Mrs. McGee, your father was one of our country's great humanitarians." He tugged her closer. For some reason he couldn't resist. "I'm honored to meet his daughter."

"We didn't know your name," Billy said, "but he told us you were a dedicated station master."

"How did my father know? I never told him."

"You didn't have to," Raines said. "Word gets around. Luckily it usually stays in the right circle."

"Are you in this circle, Mr. Raines?"

Billy cleared his throat. "Can't talk about it. Hush-hush and all that. But Jacob was proud of you. I think you were his inspiration, the reason he made his commitment. Told us you had innovative ideas. Also that you'd been hard-headed from babyhood, set in your ways."

"Can't imagine," Raines said.

Confusion showed plainly on Jessie's face. Her gaze wandered over each of them as though struggling to understand how her father could possibly know two brigands. "How did you even meet my father?"

Billy began searching the cupboards. Raines knew Billy's stomach drove him. For such a lean man, the man ate like a horse. Billy talked, his voice echoing from inside the cabinets as he pulled jars from the shelves, inspecting the contents for anything edible.

"We'd been meeting him for several months. Your father was what we call a stockbroker. He made donations to the cause—money, food, clothing. That might explain why he was in debt to Nathaniel Prentice. If times were tough, your father had enough dedication to the railroad to find any way possible to sustain it. Lately Jacob had also become an agent, plotting the routes. I assume that's how he found out about you."

"So what do you do?" Jessie asked.

"We can't talk about what we do," Raines said. "Just as I figure you prefer not to give us the details about what you do. Had a meeting scheduled with your father in just a few days, which is why we were on your road. What happened to him?"

Jessie shook her head. "I don't know. Martin simply said he suddenly got sick."

Raines nodded. "Apparently it's an epidemic."

"I don't think so. Martin is fine and Ellie seemed more than—"

Raines smiled as the pieces started falling into place. Nathaniel Prentice knew far too many of the victims, good men that had suddenly fallen ill and been lost to their cause. "But I think you've just given me a link and a way to stop the infestation."

"Mr. Raines, I am thoroughly baffled here. What infestation? What link?"

"I need to put more thought into it, but I'd say your father's illness might not have happened without some sort of ... interference."

Jessie's hands curled into fists. "You think my father was murdered? But who—" She screamed and kicked at the chair, sending

it spinning across the floor. "Damn it! She mentioned rat poison that afternoon. That bitch!"

Raines tipped the chair back up as she stalked around the kitchen. She shoved Billy out of her way and slammed the cupboard doors. Billy yanked back his hand with a yelp as one door grazed his fingers. He backed away from the little bundle of fury. She swept a pot off the cupboard, and it clattered to the floor and hit Billy in the leg. He howled and stooped to rub the injury.

"Goddamn it!" he cried. "I didn't do anything."

"You're both pissing me off!"

Raines spun her around. She shoved him in the chest, but he held tightly to her wrists. He talked to her softly and slowly, like he might a distraught child. "I don't know anything for sure yet. Don't rile yourself up."

His tone seemed to inspire more anger. She twisted, then yanked away as Billy shrank back, still rubbing his leg. Unfortunately, Raines had chosen the wrong tactic. Not uncommon, but generally when he chose the wrong tactic, he could fight his way out of the situation. He didn't want to bring this girl to her knees. She ground out the words between her teeth, her eyes spitting green fire.

"Rile myself up? Oh, Mr. Raines, you have not yet begun to see how angry I can get." She slammed her hands on her hips. "What is your role in all this?"

"That's not something I can say."

"You've as much said my father was killed for his recent activity. My father and I share similar activities."

"Yes, so I think—"

"I don't give a damn what you think. I want to know what you're going to do about it. I've just placed my best friend's future, and possibly all our lives, in your hands. I think you owe me an answer."

Raines smiled. "A bit I hadn't counted on, and somewhat intimidating. This bargain—"

"I'm fulfilling the Goddamn bargain," Jessie snapped. "But you seem reluctant to fulfill your end."

He grasped her arm, and she cried out. "You're not dead yet, so there's more to this than the railroad. Perhaps you'd better tell me about Jane and the others. And why someone might use them to get to you."

* * * *

Jessie stilled. "To get to me? I'm nothing. Why would anyone want to hurt me?"

"I don't know," Raines said. "That's what you need to figure out. What relationship do you have with Jane?"

How did she begin to describe what role Jane held in her life? She'd known Jane since she was ten and her father had brought home a beautiful young woman of perhaps eighteen to help her mother with her pregnancy. Jane had midwife experience, and Olivia Travers had become progressively weaker as her belly grew. Olivia and Jane became fast friends and Jessie loved to share their world. After Martin's birth, the two became inseparable. They were so alike, Jessie thought they seemed two halves of the same woman—one dark, one light—both blessed with an elegant grace, tall willowy bodies and gentle demeanors. Both radiated smiles from deep within, laughed with a rich, sultry abandon and displayed a gentle, quiet nature.

Part of Jessie yearned to be like them, but also knew she held too much of her pa for that. Her temper controlled her, her laughter burst out without thought, and she barreled through life with single-minded purpose, her mind never quiet. So instead of trying to emulate the two women she loved most, Jessie basked in their love and friendship, enjoying each moment in their presence. And when the third pregnancy came, and Olivia succumbed to the hardship of the birth, losing the baby as well, Jane wrapped her arms around Martin and Jessie and became their new mother.

Jane. Her friend, her mentor, her mother. And yet, to the eyes of the world, Jane was a piece of Travers property. Jessie didn't know where to start.

The door opened, and Martin and Rob came through, laughing and carrying plates of food. As their gazes roamed around the three in the room, the laughter abruptly stopped and the smiles vanished. Rob cast a glance over his shoulder at the barn. He would have touched his pocket if his hands weren't full. But Rob had never been a coward. He settled the plates on the table then turned to her. His glance clung to each man in turn, his brown eyes full of questions.

"Everythin' okay here, Jessie?"

She laid a hand on his arm and felt his quickening pulse. "Everything's fine, Rob. We got visitors last night."

Martin rushed to the door and peered across the distance. "I knew something was up. I heard people moving across the creek last night." He turned, his blue eyes locked on hers. "This is a station, isn't it?"

Billy ruffled the top of Martin's dark curls. "What does a squirt like you know about a station?"

Martin pulled away and frowned. "Fuck you, Billy."

"Martin!" Jessie cried.

Raines and Billy burst out laughing.

"You think 'cause I'm a kid I don't know anything. I know plenty. I don't just stand around. I listen to everything. I have my own ideas. When Pa died—" He took a deep breath. "I was going to go join up."

Jessie gasped. "Over my dead body."

"I wasn't going to ask your permission," he muttered.

She cuffed the back of his head. "I would have tanned your hide. You're twelve years old. How can you even think these things?"

Martin hung his head and mumbled, "I've been watching you all my life. You do whatever the hell you want."

"I do not!"

Billy reached out and took Martin's arm, tugging him closer. "The Rebels might have taken you, Galahad, but they're a desperate bunch."

"I wouldn't fight for the Rebs."

"The Union would have sent you packing. I've seen some young ones but not as young as you."

"I have," Raines said quietly. He ran a hand over his eyes. "Saw a nine-year-old. Of course I only saw him alive once."

Jessie dropped into a chair.

Martin glanced between the two men. "I love Kentucky, and I love the South, but I just don't hold with their beliefs."

"Seems we have a consensus," Raines said. "All the more reason to tell us about Jane."

"And Glory," Rob added with a smile. "Sure would like to see that woman again."

Martin filled his plate and his mouth at the same time, as words tumbled from his lips around bits of food. Jessie followed him around with a cloth, trying to catch crumbs, but he ignored her.

"Jane's like a mother to me," Martin said. "Oh, she's not too old, but she still feels like a mother. Always been around since I can remember. Took care of me even after Ellie came." He scrunched up his face and shook himself like a wet dog. "Pa always said Jane looked like liquid jasper. Don't know what jasper is, but it's got to be real pretty."

Billy paused in his chewing then lifted his head from his plate. Something flickered across his face that Jessie couldn't quite interpret. He looked stunned and a little afraid. He sat still for a moment, seemingly frozen. He slowly put down his fork and reached into his pocket. He swallowed thickly and took a deep breath as he pulled out his hand. He held it out toward Martin. A polished rock the size of a small egg lay in his palm and his quiet voice captured everyone's attention. "This is jasper."

"It's beautiful," Martin said.

Rob leaned over Billy's shoulder. "It sure is. Like a little piece of Kentucky in winter."

Martin's finger traced the rock, moving over the various colors that swirled through the golden brown rock. Jessie saw the wonder of the world in that rock—mustard, amber and corn, goldenrod and wheat, copper, cinnamon and rust, chestnut, chocolate, and mahogany. She had never seen such a beautiful thing in her entire life, except perhaps Jane. She reached out, and her finger skimmed the smooth, glossy texture, feeling the beauty of it.

Martin sighed as his hand returned to the rock, his finger touching each swirling block of color as he talked. "This is the color of Jane's hair. And this is her skin. And this golden color here is her eyes. Pa was right." He glanced up at Billy, his eyes alight with wonder and happiness. "Liquid jasper."

Raines leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. "Why are you carrying around a rock, Billy?"

For a moment Jessie didn't think he would answer then Billy folded the rock in his hand and squeezed.

"It's not a rock, Cutter. It's quartz, a mineral. This piece has been polished to perfection, a gemstone now. I found it in a shop in Washington, right after I got there."

Raines lifted his brow. "Seems an odd thing to carry around."

Billy's mouth lifted into a lopsided grin. "It's going to sound just plain stupid, but it reminded me of Clarissa. She loved to be outdoors in her garden, in the park, riding her horse outside the city. She wasn't one of those women who hid her face in the shade of a parasol or under a hat. Her skin always held the kiss of the sun, as though it shone just for her and couldn't wait to touch her. She had dark chestnut hair—glorious hair—and it always held the smell of the wind, the rain, the mist. And the colors in this rock, well, I—" His finger caressed the gemstone as a smile hovered on his mouth. "I felt closer to her, as though she'd left a small piece of herself here on earth just for me. Clarissa was unique. This is unique."

"Bet she was as pretty as Jane," Martin said, "and probably as nice."

When Billy's hand curled around his gemstone, Jessie wrapped her fingers over his. "I'll bet too."

"If Jane's anything like Clarissa, you two have been lucky to have her in your lives," Billy said. "And we need to find her as soon as possible. Today, Cutter?"

Raines shook his head. "Can't today, Billy. We have to keep an eye on our injured guest and figure a way to get them across the river."

Martin shoved another piece of bacon into his mouth. "Can I go out there with you and help?"

Jessie shook her head at the same time Raines said, "Sure."

"Oh, no. He needs to stay out of this. I don't want him involved. It could—"

"He's already involved," Raines said. "Besides, it will keep him from running off to fight a war."

"Which I already said will—"

"Yes," Raines said, "we know. Over your dead body. Hopefully we can keep him here without it coming to that. Besides, it will do the children out there good to see him. They need a bit of cheer in their lives. Can't think of a better ambassador to freedom than your brother here."

Billy glanced at Martin. "How's your handwriting, Galahad?"

Martin choked on his breakfast. "Not too good. I'm not one for books."

Jessie laughed. "Not too good is an understatement. His penmanship is atrocious." She paused and offered them a shy smile. "But slightly better than my own."

"I can write," Rob said. "Been practicin'. Gotten pretty good at it. With no help from my tutor I might add. As long as someone else does the spellin'. Haven't gotten to that at all yet." He gave Jessie a pointed look.

"Care to do a little bit of forgery, Rob?" Billy asked.
"That's going to have to wait," Raines said. "The barn's on fire."

Chapter 9

Raines grabbed his rifle from the corner as Jessie and Billy ran outside. Flames engulfed the front of the barn. The door had been swallowed in a fiery blaze that lapped and devoured the old wood. From inside came the screams of people and the sounds of hammering as they struggled to dislodge any of the boards from the frame. With the state of disrepair the barn had fallen into, Jessie knew in time they'd succeed but she didn't know how much time they had. Black smoke billowed and swirled around the structure and rose into the puffy white clouds.

Two men ran north, heading on a course toward the river.

"Get them!" Jessie shouted. "I can handle the barn. Come on, Marty, help me!"

Billy and Rob ran to the pump, while Raines stood in the center of the dooryard. Jessie didn't have time to wonder what he was doing. She ran as fast as she could to the back of the barn, Martin on her heels. She careened around the corner just as a shot rang out, followed by a sharp scream that wound through the air and mingled with the keening inside. She ignored it, and when another shot exploded through the morning, she only hoped that one met its mark as well. When she heard a third shot, she put it out of her head, not wanting to think what that meant.

In all the confusion and horror of the night before, she'd forgotten to show her guests the escape hatch at the rear of the barn. She'd punish herself later for that. She flipped open the hatch and immediately smelled the smoke. The sounds of coughing and choking filled the space, and the sounds of children crying squeezed her chest.

She hitched up her skirt and crawled through, pushing bales of hay with the palms of her hands. She clambered over the rough boards, scraping her hands. She was almost inside when her boot caught on a nail. She struggled for a moment, stuck in the opening. She clenched her jaw and pulled as hard as she could but couldn't free herself. Finally with a roar of frustration, she kicked backward. She heard the leather rip as she spilled inside.

The dark interior swallowed her when she moved from the small square of light, and the acrid smoke caused her nostrils to twitch and her eyes to sting. A wall of dark gray haze filled her vision. She struggled to her feet and let her eyes adjust to the gloom, searching for shadows skimming the weak bands of light that filtered through the cracks in the boards.

"Back here!" she shouted. Her mouth filled with smoke that swept into her lungs. She coughed and spit. Tears gathered in her eyes, fighting the smoke.

A rush of small, crying bodies collapsed against her. She touched three heads, counting as she steered them toward Martin's shape framed in the square of muted light. Martin reached in, grabbing each child in turn, and yanked them through the square. When the three children had disappeared to safety, fear immobilized her. This place was a death trap and that creeping black fog led to a nightmare. She took a tentative step away from the light. She heard Billy shouting to Raines, and that voice gave her a bit more courage. They'd never let her die in here. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did.

She stepped further into the darkness, holding the hem of her dress to her nose. A woman's hand gripped her arm. Blindly, Jessie tugged and steered the woman to the corner.

Her eyes burned. She blinked rapidly in the darkness as tears streamed down her face. She brushed them away impatiently, squinting. When a feminine body slammed into hers, she gripped another arm and twisted in a circle, pushing her by instinct, hoping it led to the trap door. The square of light had disappeared behind a wall

of smoke. The sounds of moaning and a dragging object reached her, and she stepped toward it. She came up against another woman's body and latched onto her waist, spinning her around and shoving her toward Martin's voice, which seemed locked in a dark tunnel.

She attempted to shout, but her voice cracked and croaked. "Get out!"

"But Thomas—"

"I'll get him. Go outside!"

The woman staggered away. Jessie didn't move until she heard Martin say, "I've got three kids, three ladies."

The women and children were all out. Jessie drew in a small breath, trying to yell, but her voice came out in choked cry. "Caleb!"

"Here, miss."

She staggered forward and plowed into a block of muscle, nearly knocking herself backward with the impact. Two strong hands gripped her shoulders. She reached up to his face, pulling him down, trying to talk above a whisper.

"I need some men outside now, to grab the litter."

Caleb choked out some names, and shadows scurried toward her. She pushed them in the direction of the trap door. Caleb lifted the front of the litter and continued forward. Jessie followed the shape with her hand until she reached a warm body—the tall, lean man. She'd never known his name. She got behind him and put her hands on his back, guiding him to Martin.

They moved cautiously through the dark gray curtain, blacker smoke cascading around everything in their path and enveloping them in a murky web they sucked into their lungs with every breath. The men coughed as they struggled through the deadly cloud with their burden. Caleb finally locked on Martin's voice, shifted direction and reached the door. The litter swayed and dropped down slightly as Caleb prepared to hand off his burden to the men outside.

"Damn it!" Martin shouted. "It doesn't fit."

Jessie groaned. She coughed into her skirt as the end of the litter smashed to the floor. Thomas moaned but managed to hold his scream inside.

"Lift him! Get him outside."

Caleb dropped to his knees and gathered Thomas in his arms while the other man held his legs together. As gently but as quickly as he could, Caleb shoved Thomas's upper body through the passage. Jessie saw several vague shapes grip Thomas's shoulders, and his body slid slowly through the door. Another shape, this one smaller, grabbed his legs and Thomas vanished from view.

Jessie pushed the tall man forward. He dropped down and scurried through the passage. Caleb lifted her and carried her to the meager light.

"Out with you."

She ducked down and dove through the door, taking a deep breath of reasonably clean air. She blinked in the sunshine and struggled to her knees, tripping on her dress. As she stood, she saw that Caleb had tried to follow, but the passage was too small. He couldn't get his shoulders through the opening. Martin reached through and tugged at his arms.

"Come on, mister. We can squeeze you through."

Jessie dropped to her knees, prepared to pull the boards with her hands.

"Move, Galahad."

Jessie twisted to look. Billy stood behind Martin, gripping an ax.

"Stand back, there, Caleb. Wouldn't want to damage that pretty face."

Caleb offered a grin then ducked back inside the darkness. Martin and Jessie scrambled out of the way. Billy swung the ax, blistering the boards and yanking them backwards. Each thunk punctuated the sound of the crackling flames as they moved relentlessly toward the back of the barn. Caleb's coughing intensified, and Jessie stared anxiously as the hole grew wider. Finally Billy tossed down the ax,

and Caleb wiggled through the opening, scraping his upper body on ragged boards. Billy seized his arms and tugged. They both collapsed onto the grass.

Caleb peered up at them. "How's Thomas?" A woman threw herself toward him, crying and burrowing her head into his wide shoulder. His big arm wrapped around her, hauling her upwards as he sat. "It's okay, Aggie. I'm okay."

His dark gaze flickered over each of his flock, counting heads. He nodded when he was finished, and his eyes returned to Jessie. She swiped at a teary stream that ran down her cheek.

"Thank you, miss," Caleb said.

She nodded and swung toward Billy. He dropped the ax as his arms circled her, and she burst into tears.

* * * *

Jessie stood and stared as the front of the barn slowly crumbled before her eyes, listening to the crackle of destruction. Her hard work simply vanished into the earth as a pile of ash. She wondered how she'd run her station now. What little she'd had seemed insignificant, but seeing it all disintegrate proved she'd done more than most. Raines' words came back to her. Who would want to hurt her by destroying everything good she'd tried to do?

Martin and Rob finally led the refugees into the house, and Billy and Jessie walked to the back of the property where Raines stood against a tree, his rifle cradled in his arm. A stain of blood smeared down the sleeve of his shirt. Two squirming men sat on the ground, bleeding into the grass. One had wrapped a dirty rag around his foot, his boot lying in the grass beside him. The other held a bloody hand over the back of his thigh. Their groans hung in the air. Neither man looked happy to see her, and she felt less happy to see them.

She knew who they were—Richard Morris and Allen Sikes, two wastrels who'd done odd jobs for her father throughout the years.

They counted on the fact that Sikes was Ellie's brother, and they'd always have a place to go for shelter and food. They'd taken advantage of her father's conscience more times than she could count.

As she got closer to Raines, he pulled away, attempting to hide his arm.

"Don't bother," she said. "I've already seen it. How bad?"

"Just a scrape. You can look at it later. Does that make you happy?"

She nodded then turned to the men, frowning. "How much did she pay you?"

"Not talking to you, Jessie McGee," Morris said. He wiped blood against his tattered trousers.

Raines lurched forward and swung the rifle. The butt pounded into Morris's shoulder, and a crunch echoed in the clearing. Morris screamed and fell backwards, clutching at his arm. Jessie gasped.

"You'd do well to answer the fucking questions," Raines said. He raised his leg and slammed his boot into the man's now-injured shoulder. Morris howled.

Sikes scurried backwards, planting his back against a small tree, wincing as he dragged his injured foot. "Jesus, mister. Someone make him stop." His glance slid rapidly between Jessie and Billy.

"Hard to get him to stop when someone pisses him off," Billy said. He perused Raines, his gaze following the line of his body from the dark, furrowed brow to the boot still planted against the man's shoulder. "And I think your friend here has pissed him off."

"They're pissing me off too," Jessie said. "But they always have." Raines kicked Morris in the side. "You know these men?"

"That one," Jessie nodded toward the older man sprawled on the ground, "is Richard Morris. Richard will do anything for money. And the younger one is Allen Sikes. He's Little Miss Bitchy's brother." She hunkered down to eye level and studied Sikes. He ducked his head, and the dirty blond hair fell forward like a curtain to hide his eyes. His rapid breathing washed across her face. She unwound the

bloody bandage from his foot and scrutinized the injury. "That looks bad, Allen. If you play your cards right, Mr. Raines here might be willing to fix you up. Otherwise ..."

She ripped a piece of cloth from her dress, studying his face. She wound the makeshift bandage tightly around Allen's foot. When she yanked at it and twisted the ends into a knot, he sucked in a deep, pained breath. She smiled as she patted his heel, right where she knew the injury to be.

Allen moaned and nodded toward Raines. "Take torture lessons from him, Jessie?"

"No," she said with a smile. "I'm learning them on my own. So you're working for Ellie now?"

His soft voice held a trace of petulance. "She's my sister, Jessie. It's not like I have a choice. She doesn't pay me or anything."

"You almost murdered eleven people."

Sikes glanced at the smoldering barn. A sick look settled over his pale face. "People? Ah, Christ. She didn't tell me that."

"Shut the hell up, Sikes," Morris barked. He sat up and rolled his shoulder, grimacing as a slash of pain sliced through him.

Jessie turned to Morris. "But she told you, didn't she?"

Morris's gaze shot toward Raines. His jaw clenched.

Sikes stretched out his leg, gritting his teeth. "Might as well tell her, Rich. They'll beat it out of you."

"By all means, tell her," Billy said, swinging the ax against his leg. He hefted it up. "Rifles hurt, but this little beauty could do a lot of damage."

"You wouldn't," Morris said.

Raines stepped forward. His blue eyes flashed with the darkness of midnight, and his quiet voice caused Jessie to shudder. "No, he probably wouldn't, but I would."

Jessie glanced at Raines then locked eyes with Morris. "I think he might, Richard."

Billy put himself between Raines and the two men. "No reason to jump to conclusions, Cutter. Let's hear them out." He turned to the men. "Well, gentlemen?"

"Ellie didn't mention people," Allen said in a rush. "But she knew there was a chance. She knows what you do here, Jessie. We were just supposed to scare you. Make you—"

"I said shut up, Sikes," Morris growled.

Raines strode forward and slammed his boot into Morris's chest. Morris gasped and rolled onto the ground. Raines pulled a knife from his belt and held it close to the man's face. "If you don't keep your mouth closed unless we're talking to you, I'm going to cut out your tongue."

Jessie leapt to her feet, grabbing his arm. The muscles beneath her fingers tensed, powerful and eager to follow through with the threat. Trying to explain the butchery or death of two county men was the last thing she needed, even men with the reputations like these ones held. Her hand slid down his arm to clutch his wrist. She whispered, "Cutter, stop."

His face swiveled toward hers then glanced at the hand on his arm. Raines withdrew slowly, locked eyes with the scoundrel and reluctantly slid the knife back into the sheath. He spread his arms and stepped back.

"The interrogation is yours, Mrs. McGee. Perhaps you can charm it out of them."

She straightened her dress and squared her shoulders. A trickle of sweat pooled between her breasts, and she swiped at it and trembled. She glanced in the direction of the house, where Martin and Rob filled jugs with water from the pump. Martin concentrated on the task, but Rob's stare hovered on her. She turned back to Allen Sikes.

"You failed, Allen. I'm not scared. I'm pissed off. What did Ellie think to accomplish here?"

Sikes glanced nervously at Morris. "She wants you out of Kentucky, Jessie."

Morris groaned. "Jesus, Sikes."

Jessie shook her head. "That makes no sense, Allen. I stay far away from Ellie. In fact—"

"You're a stupid bitch," Morris muttered.

Billy moved fast. He flipped the ax and swung, hitting Morris's thigh with the wooden handle.

"Goddamn it!" Morris screamed. In his anger, he forgot his pain and lunged, butting his head into Billy's stomach. Both men tumbled to the ground, and as Morris's fist plowed toward Billy's face, Raines gripped his wrist and twisted. Morris's mouth dropped open in a blood-curdling scream as his wrist broke.

Billy shoved him away. "Shut the fuck up." He plowed his fist into Morris's face, and Morris slumped to the ground. Billy stood and nudged the unconscious man with his foot, glaring, and shaking his hand. "That man has a death wish."

"I'd like to give it to him," Raines said.

"Good," Billy said, "'cause that punch fucking hurt."

Jessie put a hand on Raines' chest. "I can do without bodies to hide."

Raines reached down, grabbed Morris under the shoulders and began to drag him. "We're hiding him just the same. Bring him, Billy." He nodded his head at Allen.

Allen raised his hands. "Wait. Please."

Raines dropped Morris, whose body thunked to the ground.

Allen wiped sweat away from his eyes. "Ellie didn't tell me anything. But I know my sister."

Jessie tilted her head. "So why does she want me gone?"

"She wants you away from Nathaniel Prentice."

"I turned that man down months ago. I don't want him. If she has—"

Allen shook his head furiously. "No, no. Prentice has something she doesn't want you to find. You know how she is, Jessie. She wants money. That's all she wants." "There's very little money so—"

"But dividing it four ways cuts into her share."

"Oh, for God's sake, Allen, I don't want anything from her. And I'll take care of Martin." Jessie glanced at the pump, frowning. "Four ways?"

"Four ways," Allen said.

Jessie put her hands on her hips. "I'm very close to grabbing that ax, Allen. Talk plain."

Allen cringed back against the tree as he glanced at the ax in Billy's hand. "There's another paper, Jessie. Prentice has it. He told Ellie he'd give it back once you were out of the county, and he had both the Travers and McGee land."

Raines raked hair back from his face, and peered down at the injured man. More sweat popped out on Allen's face. "What's on this paper?"

Allen moved his leg, grimacing. "You'll fix me up?"

"I'll think about it," Raines snarled. "Keep talking and we'll see how much your information is worth."

"Ellie already knew of course, but the paper confirmed it. It's another will I guess, dividing up Jacob's property between four people—Ellie, Jessie, Martin and ..." He glanced at Jessie. "Jane's baby."

Jessie dropped to the ground. "Jane's having a baby?"

Allen nodded vigorously. "Ellie was near to a fit once she found out. I was working that day. I thought maybe she'd shoot Jacob right then and there. Guess you'll be having a brother or sister soon."

"That makes things a little more urgent," Raines said. He reached down and took Morris by the ankles. "Billy, help Mr. Sikes to the stable, then get out your toy box. Jessie, go get my medical kit and meet me in the stable."

* * * *

This time Billy wasn't nearby to put himself between Raines and Morris. When Morris came to and had the nerve to open his mouth, Raines knocked him out with another fist to the jaw, then went to work digging out the bullet from his thigh. He had far more finesse removing a bullet than she ever dreamed of having, but he seemed unconcerned about the groans of pain coming from the unconscious man. Afterwards, he set the broken wrist and crafted a makeshift splint. He took more care with Allen and found the bullet had gone clean through the flesh of his heel, without hitting the bone. He cleaned it up as best he could, sutured the bleeders, and wound it in a clean strip of cloth. He gave Allen something for the pain, and within moments the younger man was asleep.

When Raines finished, he sat impatiently on the anvil while she inspected where the bullet had grazed his upper arm. Morris had managed to squeeze off one shot and Jessie deemed him lucky his aim failed miserably. She glanced at the unconscious man. She hadn't thought herself a violent person—impatient, maybe, but not violent—but realized Morris would be in a lot worse shape if something had happened to Raines. She would have made sure of it.

After washing the wound, she wrapped it in a clean cloth and tisked at the condition of his shirt. "I'm not going to get that blood out, you know."

"Definitely outside your realm of expertise." Raines inspected her bandage. "But your bandages are perfect. Don't worry about the blood. I've worn more of my own blood than this."

"But not doing something for me."

She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned toward him. When he raised his face, she almost lost her nerve but forged ahead.

As she neared, he smiled. "You going to make a habit of this thank-you business?"

"Yes"

"I can live with that."

She gently pressed her mouth on his and whispered, "Thank you, Cutter."

His arms swept around her, spilling her against him as his mouth came down hard against hers. She ran her hands around the back of his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin and the loose strands of hair against his fingers. She opened her mouth to accept his kiss, and her moan was met by another from the corner. Raines' lips lingered on hers for a moment then he set her back on her feet, muttering, "These men are a pain in my ass."

On trembling legs, she watched him search until he found some dirty, rusty shackles and chains under a work bench. She hadn't even known they existed. Her property was part of the original homestead and obviously still held remnants of days long ago. She hated to think of that. The injured men couldn't get far, but Raines didn't take any chances. With the medical attention out of the way, he dragged both men to the anvil and secured them by wrapping the chain around the hunk of immovable metal near the forge.

When they finished, they went to Rob's cabin where they found most of the refugees enjoying breakfast beneath the shade of a tall oak. Inside, Rob and Caleb hovered over Thomas, who smiled up at a pretty woman and the little girl beside her. They left the group in Rob's capable hands, and several of the men agreed to keep an eye on the stable.

As they neared the house, once again Jessie saw her brother huddled at a table with one of the men, this time Billy. They sat outside beneath the tree in the dooryard, talking with their heads together like two conspirators. Something sat on the table near them. It seemed to be some sort of traveling chest, perhaps the box Rob had told her about. When Martin raised his head, a huge cut blazed across his forehead, a streak of horrible red surrounded by a blackish bruise. She nearly knocked Raines over when she burst into full speed and careened to the table, coming up hard against the edge. Cursing under

her breath, she grasped her brother's face between her hands. She thumbed at some smudges of soot on his cheek.

"Oh, dear God, did this happen during the fire? How did I miss it?"

Martin surprised her by laughing. "I'm okay. It's all fake! Look."

He pulled at the small chest, and she studied the contents. An immense array of pots and jars filled the box, holding different colors of paste. Pieces of seemingly peeled off flesh, some painted with streaks of oozing blood, littered the table. There were fake noses, several pairs of glasses, moustaches, hair pieces and sideburns.

Billy picked up a few pieces of hair, wiggling them in front of her face. "Stage props. Most of my own invention. I love making them. You'd be amazed what my fellow actors will pay for a piece of peeling flesh. I have a bloody fortune stashed in Washington." He leaned forward and peeled the bruise from Martin's face, dropping it back into the box. "Kill anyone, Cutter?"

"I voted for yes," Martin said.

Raines laughed. "Damn, kid, you don't give me much credit. I can control myself."

"Ha!" Jessie said. "I'd like to ask Richard Morris about your control."

Raines turned Jessie toward him, cupped her face, and a funny feeling coiled through her. She really needed to get a grip on herself. She feared she'd simply moan and lean against him, despite the fact he studied her like an odd specimen he'd found in his Massachusetts General.

Raines leaned over her shoulder, and a wave of heat passed through her as his arm skimmed her body. He lifted the bruise from the box. He rummaged around for a few moments, then selected a few other items and passed them to Billy.

"Did you want to do a little playacting today, Cutter?" He shook his head. "No, not me. Her."

"Interesting," Billy said. "I'm in."

A wave of panic swept through her. "I'm not an actress! I can't do that. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you be a damsel in distress?" Raines asked.

Martin snorted. "Not damn likely."

"Damn bloody can," Jessie said. "I can be a perfectly fine damsel in distress. And, Marty, you're picking up bad language from somewhere. Who has been teaching you all these words?" All heads turned in her direction. She stared at their open mouths and wide eyes. "What? It sure as hell isn't me!"

All three shook their heads and Raines chuckled. "No, it sure as hell couldn't be you."

Billy pulled her down beside him on the bench. He gripped her chin, twisting and turning it, and holding up pieces to her face. "Too big. That would have probably killed her. No, that's too small, not enough force to knock her out. Is this an abduction scenario? How did the abduction take place? Did I hit her with my fist, a cane?"

Raines cocked his head. "What the hell does it matter, Billy?"

Billy huffed. "I'm a professional here, Cutter. Don't ask me to compromise my artwork. I need specifics to do the job right."

"You're not going to be judged on this," Raines said.

Billy stared hard, his face serious. "Humor me."

Raines sighed and raked his hair back from his face. He took a seat on the bench. "Okay. I'll make up a story, just for you."

He locked his gaze on Jessie, seemingly memorizing the planes of her face. His scrutiny once again caused that heat to swell through her body, and she had a hard time meeting his eyes. Just as she thought she'd pass out, his glance shot back to Billy.

"You stole into her house after midnight through a half-open window. You stealthily crept through the house, trying each door until you found her room. She was fast asleep in bed. You knew that because you could hear her snoring rather loudly even through the closed door."

"I don't snore!"

Billy snickered. "You do. But just a little. It's kind of cute."

She slapped his arm. Raines gave her a look. She fluttered her lashes and a thrill went through her when he twisted uncomfortably. "Go on," she said sweetly.

"She'd kicked off the covers and lay naked on the bed."

Jessie gave him a stern look. "There's a child present."

"Jeez, Jessie, I'm not a little kid," Martin said. "Go on, Cutter."

He nodded. "Where was I?"

Martin grinned. "Naked on the bed."

"Right. Naked," Raines said. "As you opened the door, you realized she must have heard the doorknob rattle because she sat up, startled, a little bit dazed. Her eyes were cloudy with lust from a dream she'd been having. Her breasts heaved, small, but perfect, and her rosy lips parted as she gasped. You—"

Another wave of heat swept through her and she fanned her face. "Shut the hell up, Raines."

Raines spread his hands. "He wanted a touch of realism. I was just—"

Jessie huffed. "How would you know how I wake up after a dream?"

He smiled. "Because I watched you sleep last night and for one moment—"

"Oh," she said softly. "Never mind."

Martin waved his hand in front of Raines' face. "Then what? Get to the hitting part."

"A bit violent, eh, Marty?" Billy asked.

"Nah, but I like a good story."

"Who doesn't?" Billy asked. "Pray, Cutter, continue. She gasped ..." He waved his hand.

Raines glanced at her and smiled. Jessie couldn't resist. She smiled back.

"She gasped, and for one moment you were spellbound by her beauty. You stared at that rich black hair tumbling over her shoulders,

curling softly over full, round breasts, those eyes like emerald fire sparkling in the moonlight through the window, the dewy flush of her skin as that lust still consumed her—have to have lust or the story just falls flat—but you realized you weren't there to worship this woman's body. You were there to abduct her and had a job to do."

Billy turned to Jessie. "What were you dreaming about?"

"Does that matter?" she asked.

"Not a bit. Just want to know." He cast a glance at Raines, who nodded. "We both kind of want to know. Was I in it?"

"Yes," she sighed. "You were both in it. Does that make you happy?"

"Immensely," Billy said. He turned back to Raines. "So how did I hit her? This is the most important part."

Raines leaned forward. "She screamed, as loud and as deadly as a banshee, then panicked. She swung her legs to the side of the bed and too late realized her foot was caught in the sheets. She crashed," Raines pounded his fist into his cupped palm and Jessie jumped, "into the floor face first. And knocked herself out." He shook his head sadly and glanced at Martin, who giggled. "She's a beauty, but not all that graceful."

Jessie balled her fist and whacked him in the arm.

"Hey! Injured, remember?"

"Oh, my God."

He winked at her. "It was the other arm." When she pulled back her fist again, he held up his hand. "I said she was a beauty."

"Indeed," Jessie said.

"I can work with that," Billy said. "Can she hit the bed post first? I enjoy comedy as well as drama."

Raines nodded. "Absolutely. She's very clumsy." Martin burst into laughter, and Billy resumed digging deep in his box. Raines turned back to her. "But very pretty. Even sooty."

He dropped a kiss on her nose.

Chapter 10

Jessie peered at herself in the mirror. She reached up and touched the bloody bruise spreading across her forehead. She winced by instinct then laughed at her own foolishness. Martin's face appeared behind her in the mirror. He grinned.

"It's hideous," he said. "I love it!"

"And that cut on your cheek would leave a scar," Billy said, scrunching his hair in his fist. "I like a touch of realism. Might garner a little sympathy."

"I think you've forgotten who we're visiting," Jessie said. "Ellie has no sympathy, particularly for me. What exactly do you think we'll get from her?" She whirled from the mirror and met Raines' eyes as he dragged a rag across his already well-polished Henry.

"I'm hoping to convince her she's been double-crossed. If she thinks Prentice is trying to get rid of you himself, she's liable to tell us his intention."

Rob shuffled through a stack of papers. "I hate to think of Jane being in trouble. Anythin' I can do to help?"

"You just keep working on those certificates, Rob," Raines said. "You can help Jane and the others by making sure we keep this station running."

"Got most of 'em done," Rob said. "Just need some witness signatures. Marty, want to start?"

Martin lifted the pen from the table, then paused. "What name?"

"Anyone but your own," Raines said. "Use your imagination."

"Got the list done too," Rob said. He pushed a page across the table. "The one you needed for filin', whatever that is."

Raines lifted it and blew on the ink. "It gets added to a ledger in Washington. Makes it all official and free people out of our refugees. I have a courier I meet once a month in Cincinnati. He gets it to the right office. In the meantime, these documents get our friends across the river and into the free land of Ohio. If they're stopped by a bounty hunter, he'll let them pass. You've done an excellent job, Rob."

"Happy to help."

Raines stuffed the paper into a pocket in his jacket as Billy turned away from the mirror. Jessie laughed to see old one-eyed Billy, his handsome face hidden beneath his ghastly scars and wild hair. He lurched toward them, rolling his shoulder. Rob glanced up, shook his head, and went back to writing. Jessie smiled to see *Caleb Raines* on the document in front of him.

She walked to Billy, deliberately swaying her hips and giving him the most seductive glance she could from beneath her lashes. She cupped his bristly cheeks and his mouth twisted in a leering smile as his hands strayed down her waist. She planted a long, leisurely kiss on his mouth. "I've missed you, handsome."

Billy snuggled his face into her neck. "Ready for a little fun, my beauty?"

"Always."

Raines hoisted his rifle over his shoulder. "Save it, you two." Jessie laughed and headed for the wagon.

* * * *

She'd thought her father's plantation couldn't get any more decrepit than it already was. They'd all fallen on hard times in the last few years, and the Travers homestead hadn't been immune. But she'd been wrong. When the wagon swung into the dooryard, she stared bleakly at the ruin around her. In less than a week, her stepmother had managed to kill all of her father's hard work and dreams and practically destroyed every hope of keeping this place alive.

"Damn her," Jessie muttered. "Look at this place. She's deliberately placed the property and finances in jeopardy. No one's even finished the harvest!"

She started to rise in the back of the wagon, but Billy shoved her back down. "You're not the lady of the manor here, Jessie girl. You're a hostage, remember?"

Jessie flexed her wrists inside the ropes. Billy had done them as loosely as possible while retaining his precious realism, but they chafed and cut into her skin. A small trickle of blood snaked down the back of her hand, and it itched like crazy. She rubbed it on the back of her dress. What was a little more blood? Everything she had seemed covered in it.

"My hands are numb. Going to be hard to smack her silly with dead hands."

"You're not getting the opportunity," Raines said. "Keep your mouth shut and let us do the talking."

Billy glanced over his shoulder and gave her a smile. "If she doesn't keep quiet, I have this." He lifted his arm and brandished a long white cloth that fluttered in the breeze. "Wouldn't want to have to gag you, Jessie, but it can be arranged. You can do the usual hostage protesting though. You don't seem like a woman that would surrender willingly." He winked at her.

"I would never surrender," Jessie muttered. "In fact, I can't believe you captured me at all. If this were real life, it wouldn't have happened. You'd both be dead."

"Dead, my ass," Raines said.

She fidgeted on the bottom of the hard, wooden cart. "My ass is dead too, not that either of you would care."

Billy laughed and poked Raines with his elbow. "Oh, we care, don't we, Cutter? Might have some plans for that pretty ass later on."

Jessie huffed and threw back her hair with an irritated toss of her head. It did nothing to improve her mood. "You can keep your

thoughts off my ass for now. Can you two keep your minds on the subject at hand? Where is she anyway?"

She rose to her knees as her gaze roamed from the barn, to the field, to the house. Ellie was nowhere to be seen, and an eerie quiet hung over the plantation. The only sound was the soft whisper of the early autumn wind and the crashing of the leaves as they fell to earth and nestled in untidy piles. Finally the soft whinny of a horse stirred the quiet. Ellie couldn't leave the property without the horse.

"Ellie! Help!"

She wiggled and squirmed, trying to appear desperate to dislodge her bonds in case Ellie lurked somewhere nearby. She staggered to her feet and threw herself over the side of the wagon. She landed face first on the ground and came up sputtering, spitting dirt out of her mouth. The last thing she heard before she took off running was Billy's tribute, "She's a better actress than Laura Keene, but Laura can be a bit melodramatic."

She almost laughed out loud, but when she nearly tripped over her own dress, she realized acting required intense concentration. She didn't want to fall again, knock herself out and miss all the fun. She barreled toward the barn, running awkwardly with her hands behind her back. How did anyone fleeing for their lives do this and manage to get anywhere?

"Ellie!"

As she ran, careening toward the barn and screaming her lungs out, the door opened, and Ellie squeezed through the opening, glaring suspiciously. When Jessie plowed into her and the impact shoved her against the wooden planks, Ellie screeched and flailed her arms, trying to dislodge her. She pushed the other woman away, and Jessie landed on her ass in the dirt. It hurt but Jessie happily accepted the pain, knowing she had the feeling back.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Ellie barked.

Jessie bit the inside of her cheek, struggling to no avail to find some tears. It increased her frustration. Some actress.

She brightened almost immediately when she realized crying would be the worst possible thing she could do. Ellie would see through that faster than anything. She twisted on the ground, trying to get her legs settled to lift herself up.

"Damn it, Ellie! Help me up!"

Ellie glanced around the dooryard, trying to see around the side of the house. "What's going on?" She reached down blindly, never taking her eyes off the house, and caught Jessie's arm, hauling her up. When Jessie wiggled, Ellie's gaze finally returned to her. "Why are you tied up? I didn't tell them—"

"Jesus, Ellie, quit your gabbing and undo these ropes. They're coming!" Ellie started to tug on the knots, and Jessie felt the ropes burn against the already tender skin. "Hurry!"

"Stop right there, ladies."

Raines' voice would have sent a shiver of fear down her spine if she hadn't been having such a good time. Instead a liquid heat spread through her that thoroughly dissolved the pain in her wrists. She peered through her tangles of hair, trying to stay in her damsel-in-distress character, but the man looked like sin itself as he strode slowly across the distance. When Billy appeared around the corner, Jessie heard Ellie's breath stutter in her chest, and her hands dropped from the knots.

"Ellie, keep going," she whispered furiously. "I've got to get away from here."

"They have guns," Ellie sputtered. "And that man ... he's hideous! What have you gotten yourself into? Get the hell out of here."

She shoved Jessie's back, and Jessie staggered forward a few steps before catching her balance. Raines grabbed the ropes knotted behind her, gave a little twist and shoved her.

She whirled around and butted her body against his. He ignored her. "That hurt, you bastard."

Billy caught her against his chest, running his hands provocatively down her back to cup her ass.

"Now now, my little kitten. Keep your claws to yourself."

Ellie paled and drew closer to the barn wall, reaching for the latch on the door. Her stare flicked quickly between the two men, as though trying to gauge which might be more dangerous. Finally her gaze settled on the rifle in Raines' hand. Jessie pressed her face against Billy's shoulder before Ellie saw the smile on her face.

"Take her back to the wagon, Billy," Raines said.

"Ah, Cutter, I like having her near me. She smells so pretty." He buried his nose in her hair, making snuffling noises. Jessie had to stifle a giggle.

Raines shot him a firm glance. "If you'd been watching her better, she wouldn't have gotten out of the wagon."

"Ah, she was on my blind side, Cutter."

His twisted mouth drew sideways and down in a pout. Jessie peeked through the shelter of her hair, watching as Ellie shuddered in revulsion. Jessie hung on to her pretend fear by a thread. Billy looked so pitiful and hideous at the same time that if Ellie had been anyone else, Jessie might have had a shred of compassion. But of course it was Ellie.

She twisted her shoulders, whipping her head from side to side then slammed her foot down on Billy's instep. Billy howled while she tore away from him, screaming, "Stop touching me, you freak!"

Ellie shrank back further, trying to disappear into the wall. Raines strode forward, gripped Jessie's arm in a vise-grip and yanked her close.

"That's enough out of you."

He swung his fist and she closed her eyes, wondering what the hell was going on. They hadn't rehearsed this scene, and her world careened crazily. She'd never been punched in the face before. Would the pain be instantaneous or did it come within moments? Would she black out? She heard a hard punch near her face, but felt nothing. She prepared herself for the worst, but the pain never surfaced.

Raines leaned down and whispered, "Drop to the ground." She raised one eye slightly and peeked at him from under her lashes. "Now!"

She slumped to the ground, trying to land softly but that proved next to impossible with her arms tied. She whacked her head and saw brilliant flashes of light streak across a black background. She shook her head to clear it and opened one eye a slit in time to see Ellie backing up as Raines moved toward her.

"May I ask what you're doing here and why exactly my stepdaughter is bound and unconscious on the ground?"

"Couple of reasons, ma'am. First, we've come for some stolen property."

Jessie watched as Ellie struggled to form words. "What makes you think it's here?"

"I don't think anything, ma'am. I've just been hired to get it back."

She straightened and adjusted the bodice of her dress. "I can assure you I have nothing you'd be looking for. What is it exactly?"

Raines tipped the hat back on his forehead. "A woman. Early thirties, pretty as they come apparently. She's gone missing. My employer thinks she might be here."

"Oh, Christ," Ellie muttered. She clamped her mouth shut. She stood a little straighter as her hand roamed the back of her neck.

Sweating, Ellie?

He walked toward the barn, and Ellie jumped in front of the door.

"And just who is your employer?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Ellie lifted her chin. "Well, this phantom employer of yours has made a mistake. I'm not in the habit of either stealing property or concealing property someone else has stolen. Get off my land and tell

him to go to hell." She whirled around and her hand fumbled with the latch on the barn door.

"We've also come for the boy."

Ellie turned slowly, her brow furrowed. She shook her head. "What boy?"

Raines tossed a glance at Jessie. "Her brother."

"He's not here! She took him days ago." Ellie threw back her head and yelled inarticulately, clutching her hair. "This was all supposed to be so simple. Why is everyone so incompetent?"

"She said he was here."

"Don't believe any of her wild stories. She's a liar," Ellie said.

"I am not!"

* * * *

Raines groaned when Jessie lurched to her knees, swayed slightly, then tried to get to her feet. If the woman ever listened to a word he said, it would be a fucking miracle.

The Travers woman clenched her fists and glared at her stepdaughter, practically daring her to disagree. "You took him days ago, bitch."

"Someone take this rope off me so I can kill her," Jessie snarled.

Billy whirled around and lunged at Jessie, but she slipped out of his grasp. "You didn't hit her hard enough, Cutter. Want me to try?" He peered at Jessie with narrowed eyes as he ground out the words. "When *I* hit someone they *stay down*."

Raines snorted. "Don't bother. You can't count on her for anything except trouble."

Ellie of Little Miss Bitchy fame stomped toward them. When she reached Jessie, she planted her hands on her hips. "What did you do with the brat? If he disappears, there's going to be hell to pay, and I'm not going to be the one paying *that* debt. How do you think it's going to look if—"

She swept a hand across the visible sweat running between her breasts. Her hand tucked into her ample cleavage and withdrew a handkerchief that she ran across her pale skin. This woman offered lush temptation for just about any man, but Raines had already decided a fiery little vixen who couldn't act her way out of a flour sack held more appeal for him.

Jessie lifted her chin. "If what, Ellie?"

Ellie ignored her, waving a hand in his direction. "Why are you embroiling me in whatever trouble you've caused these men?"

Billy sauntered forward, giving her his best leering smile. "Oh, it's been no trouble, ma'am. She just about knocked herself on the bedpost. Took a tumble, she did. Not a very graceful chit, is she?"

Raines snickered when Jessie screeched and marched to Billy. "I'm going to stuff that story up your—"

Billy pulled the gag from his pocket with a flourish, and Raines laughed when he shoved it between her open lips. She sputtered and fumed, shaking her head wildly in an attempt to dislodge it. Billy stroked his hands over her hair as though petting a dog, brushing it down over her sweaty face.

"Now now, kitten. Settle down. We'll have you where you belong in no time."

Raines glanced at Ellie, who stood watching the scene, her head tilted, brow furrowed.

"What exactly are you planning to do with her?" she asked.

Raines shouldered his rifle. "Been hired to bring her to someone. Paid a fortune for her, though I wonder why. She's a bit mean-spirited for a whorehouse. Most men like to keep their balls intact. This little vixen, well, she's a handful. I don't envy the fool who gets taken in by her obvious charms." He let his gaze drift down her body, watching her squirm and enjoying the rosy flush of shame that flooded her cheeks. Or that might have been anger. Either way, he liked it. "Might be worth the trouble though."

He reached out and cupped her breast in his hand. She jerked away, trying to mutter "pig" from behind her gag.

"She's not very articulate, is she, Billy?"

Billy shook his head sadly. "No, Cutter, not a bit."

The gag helped smother the scream of outrage, but not entirely.

Ellie held up her hand in Jessie's direction. "Enough is enough, Jessie McGee. Just stop the dramatics. I'm tired of listening to you, as usual. You wear out your welcome fast." Jessie drew in a shuddering breath and took a step forward, but Ellie pointed at her and she came to a stop. "Don't even think about it. Now," she turned back to Raines, who let his eyes drop to the tempting display of cleavage, "I want to know who hired you." Ellie smiled, and Raines heard the exasperated huff that came from Jessie's direction.

He smiled back, hoping it would instill a little trust in Ellie and drive their little wildcat into a fury. For some reason he enjoyed riling her up. Ellie softened with a little sigh, and Jessie began to stalk through the grass. Mission accomplished on both counts.

"Doubt you'd know him, ma'am," Raines said.

He sidled a little closer to Little Miss Bitchy. Jessie's eyes flared with anger through the tangles of her hair. He loved that spark of fire. She whirled around with a huffy little muffled gasp but continued to look over her shoulder.

Raines lifted a curl from Ellie's shoulder. When he heard a throaty growl, he glanced sideways. Jessie thundered toward them, stomping as loudly as she could through the cushion of grass. Billy snatched her around the waist. The momentum carried them around in a circle and nearly pulled them both to the ground. Suddenly glad for the ropes binding her wrists, Raines tucked a smile back inside before it showed. He let Billy struggle with his little hostage.

Teasing Ellie's curls with his fingers, he allowed the back of his hand to brush against the swell of her breast. Her breath caught as he met her eyes. He should be used to it, but every time a woman glanced at him, it surprised him to see so much in her eyes. He could

read this one's mind. She wanted to fuck him right where they stood. If they were alone, he'd no doubt she would try.

"A genteel lady such as yourself might travel in the same circles, but this man is a rich fellow from Maysville."

"I don't know many of the people in Maysville, so you're probably—"

Raines cocked his head. "He does have some property near here, where we're to meet him."

Ellie's carefully manicured brows rose. "Nathaniel Prentice?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's the one. You'd be wise to stay away from him, Mrs. Travers. Not a nice man."

She frowned then a smile curved across her lips. "Well, I appreciate the warning, Mr. ...?"

He tipped his head. "Raines, ma'am."

She put her hand on his arm, squeezing gently, and gave him a coy smile. "Oh, please. Call me Ellie, Mr. Raines."

"Then it's Cutter, Ellie."

Once again Jessie flailed in Billy's arms. He heard Billy say, "Down, girl," and nearly burst into laughter. After this little show, he would be ready for the Washington stage in Billy's next performance. He'd be capable of out-performing John Wilkes Booth.

Ellie caressed her chin with the backs of her fingers then trailed them down her neck to rest against her breast, where she toyed with the edge of her blouse. "Your warning comes a little late, Cutter. Nate and I are old friends. Funny. He never said Jessie was part of the plan." She tapped a finger against her mouth. "But I like it. Yes, I like it a lot."

Jessie whirled again, dragging Billy with her, and tried to scream, "You bitch," but the cloth trapped the venom and turned her protest into a muffled groan.

"Talk about bitch," Ellie muttered.

Raines offered a sympathetic smile. "She is that, ma'am, er, Ellie. Nothing but trouble."

Ellie cocked her hip as she inspected her stepdaughter, now trapped on the ground beneath Billy. He had his face buried in her neck, but Raines heard the muffled laughter as he tried to kiss her into submission, and her furious growls as she fought him.

"A whorehouse, you say? Where?"

Raines shook his head. "Not sure."

"New Orleans is where Nate sends most of the women," Ellie said. "Of course, they don't stay there. Apparently it's not far enough for Nate's taste. He wants them permanently off American soil. Much safer that way. Generally, he's dealing with stolen property. I think he sends them on to Barbados. From there, who knows? They could end up anywhere, couldn't they?"

She smiled sweetly, and Raines pitied Jacob Travers for having been married to this pretty serpent.

"Indeed, Ellie. They could end up anywhere." She brushed against him, and he put his arm around her back.

"Of course, Nate doesn't sink himself too far into the system," Ellie continued. "He won't keep her long. I think his contact meets him once a month or so. Don't know where he'll hide her in the meantime, but we don't really have to worry about that too much, do we?"

"No, we don't. I'm just doing my job. Been paid well and been offered more. Looking forward to being a landowner." He glanced around, taking in the property. Ellie watched him curiously. "In fact, this property suits me just fine. Looking forward to settling down."

Ellie lurched backward. "What?"

"You didn't know? Well, I assumed—"

"Assumed what?" Ellie snapped. "That Prentice was giving *my* property to a no-good bounty hunter?"

"Well, now, ma'am, I take offense to that. I'm so much more than a bounty hunter. And we might be able to come to an arrangement of sorts." He reached for her and she smacked his hand. "Damn him! He's supposed to buy this land from me! My stupid brother—" She swung toward Jessie, glared at her then turned back to him. "When did you abduct her?"

"Last night, ma'am. While she was sleeping."

She spoke softly, her teeth grinding as she spoke. "Why is Prentice making me go through these motions if he planned to have her abducted? And where is that mongrel brother of hers?"

Jessie must have heard that because she bucked wildly beneath Billy. Billy clambered to his feet and hauled her up, tisking over the blood on her hands.

"Well, now, ma'am, I don't know your answers, but I do know Prentice generally does what he wants."

She began to pace, muttering to herself. "Bastard. That fire would have worked. She'd have left this county by tomorrow. He doesn't have to send her all the way to Barbados. It was supposed to be so simple. After taking care of Jacob, Nate said he would handle that horrible woman and her unborn brat." She turned to him suddenly. "And now she's *missing* you say?"

Raines wanted to backtrack to her statement about Jacob Travers. It tempted him, but also offered complications. Instead, he kept quiet. It was enough to know she'd been involved in Travers' murder. They could worry about the evidence later. "Well, ma'am, we only know—"

She waved her hand in the air, dismissing him. She began to talk softly to herself, staring at the ground. "That fire would have gotten her out of Kentucky once and for all. She couldn't possibly live here with everyone knowing her illegal activities. She's lucky it was me. Someone else could have done worse. The property should be mine, all of it, to sell to him—at a very high price of course. And I wouldn't have to worry about that damnable will he's holding over my head. And now he says she's *gone* ..." She turned to Raines, shaking her head as though to clear her muddled thoughts. "I want to know what changed."

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Travers."

"He's double-crossing me, isn't he? He obviously plans to take this land and give some of it to you. I wouldn't count on that, by the way. He's a snake." Her eyes widened, and she gasped. "He's going to implicate me in Jessie's disappearance."

"Ma'am, like I said, I don't know what goes through his mind. But I do know I can't just take him the girl. He wants the boy too."

Ellie screeched and clenched her fists. "I don't have the boy! Ask *her* where he is."

"We have. And we searched the property. He's gone. I can only assume—" He glanced toward the barn. "Have you disposed of him already? Prentice said we might be too late."

Ellie glared at him. "Too late for what?"

Raines tipped back his hat. "A boy would probably go a lot faster than a grown man. Heard your husband didn't cause much trouble. Less than a day. What was it, ma'am? Rat poison? Horrible way to die. Saw a man once—"

"Is he trying to implicate me in Jacob's murder?" Ellie whispered furiously. "Morris did it, not me. Nate paid him. I didn't even know till later. I had nothing to do with it!"

Jessie stared wordlessly. His heart nearly cracked in two when he saw the tears sparkling in her eyes. When one dripped down her cheek, he wanted to gather her in his arms. Billy saved him by leading her back to the wagon. She peered over her shoulder, her eyes grim and shining.

As sorry as he felt for Jessie, the anger boiling inside of him as he turned his attention back to the accomplice in Travers' murder nearly overwhelmed his common sense. She stared at him coolly, her blue eyes challenging him to speak one word of condemnation. He refused to waste his time.

"I can only assume you've handled the boy," he said. "If that's the case, I'll report to Mr. Prentice the boy is no longer an issue."

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"Suit yourself, Mr. Raines. Now, if you'll excuse me, this property still belongs to me, and you've interrupted me."

She pulled open the barn door, gathered her skirts and disappeared into the dark interior.

Chapter 11

When Billy untied the bonds, Jessie lolled against his body like a broken doll. She wouldn't look at him, and it hurt him to feel how listless she'd become. All the life and spark in her had fled. Billy cupped her face, tilted it up him and very quietly said, "Jessie, darlin'."

Her eyes fluttered wearily. Dead, dark green stones stared back at him. "Not now, Billy. Please. I can't talk about it."

"Understandable, but I'm not going to lose you. Come on. I'd rather you be angry than—"

"All of it. My father's death, Jane's disappearance, the fire. How can she hate us so much?"

She drew away and spread her hands. The bloody marks on her wrists were stark against the pale skin. He tenderly wiped at the abrasions with the edge of the gag. She never winced.

"I would have given it all to her," she whispered. "I don't care about any of it anymore."

"Don't try to understand. It won't be possible."

Raines rounded the corner of the house. He hurled his rifle into the back of the wagon, where it clattered against the rough boards before landing on a pile of bedrolls, then pivoted so fast Billy grabbed Jessie and hauled her backwards. Raines drove his foot into the porch railing. It disintegrated beneath his boot with a ricocheting crack, sending shards of wood into the air around them. Billy pushed Jessie down, covering her to shield her from the flying debris.

"That bitch!" He slammed his hat to the ground then raked the hair back from his face, staring up at the sky. "I've never met such a

cold-hearted, conniving, viperous bitch anywhere else on this Goddamned planet."

Billy looked down at Jessie's tearful face. He gave her a wink. "He thinks he's such a world traveler."

"Not now, Billy," Raines snarled. "I'm going to make it my life's work to—"

Jessie burst into laughter. It was borderline hysterical, but Billy was glad to hear it. Tears continued to stream down her face, but her tears of grief were now tears of a different kind. She wiped at them as her body shook, but as her laughter subsided, color flushed back into her cheeks and fire re-ignited in her eyes. He gathered her in his arms, simply grateful the blonde witch hadn't destroyed her.

"We can take her down," Billy said. "Wouldn't take much. Just a little talk with Sheffield."

Jessie flinched. "Sheffield? You mean the man who likes boys?"

Raines ran a hand over his jaw. "Wasn't exactly honest about that. Sheffield's my contact in Cincinnati. A good man with even better connections."

Shocked, Billy could do nothing but stare at his friend. He leaned forward and whispered, "What about the hush-hush and all that, Cutter?"

Raines shrugged. "She's part of the mission now."

"I am?" she asked.

Raines bent to retrieve his hat, snapping it against his trousers to dislodge the dust. "Seems you have a pretty big stake in this, Jessie. It's more than rescuing some adults now. There's also a baby involved—a baby who is by rights a free person. And your sibling."

"Prentice has sent the last woman to New Orleans as far as I'm concerned," Billy said. "We have confirmation now, and I want to shut this down."

Raines glanced at him. "To do that, we sure could use a woman with Jessie's acting talent."

Billy pursed his lips and studied her. Jessie bristled under his scrutiny. Finally he shook his head. "No, she needs more rehearsal. She over-acts. And improvises. Only the best can get away with that. She doesn't have the self-control—"

She slapped her hands against his chest and shoved him hard. As he staggered backwards, he tried hard to keep a straight face.

"Self-control! I am the epitome of self-control. You have no idea how good I can be. I'll prove it next time."

"Okay then. I can't wait for your next performance." Billy swept Jessie into a huge hug, kissing her into a fit of giggles, sorry to taste the tears on her face.

"Of course," Raines said, "it's just temporary. I don't want to put you in more danger than necessary."

Jessie straightened and tugged at her skirt, giving him a salute. She tucked in her chin and lowered her voice. "I live for danger, sir."

"Not on my watch," Raines said. "When we get Jane and the others back, you're returning to your real life. We'll see Prentice gets his due. We'll shut down his trade and find the evidence for murder charges. That man's been a festering rot in this area for far too long."

Billy nodded as he climbed into the wagon. "And we'll have some great stories to tell. Sheffield loves a good story."

Raines put his hands on Jessie's waist to lift her into the wagon. "Wait."

She gathered her skirts and flew up the stairs to the porch, pushing open the front door. Billy heard the sounds of thumping and slamming. When Jessie came back out, she carried a cloth bundle. Billy caught a glimpse of deep purple peeking through the cloth, and the sunlight flashed off a glass jar.

"Is that what I think it is?"

She gave him a cute little smile and nodded like a child with a secret.

"Be still my heart."

"I think we deserve it." Jessie giggled in girlish delight. "I took it all."

Raines took the bundle and settled it carefully in the back. He swung Jessie up into the front seat. When she laid her head on Billy's shoulder, he put an arm around her and drew her close as Raines jumped into the back.

"Next stop?" Billy asked.

"Prentice's," Raines said. "But find us a campsite for the night. I want to plan this out a bit."

Jessie glanced over her shoulder. "While we're moving, Cutter, you might want to clean up that Henry. I think I saw a speck of dirt on it."

He frowned and lunged for the rifle. When Billy and Jessie laughed, a red stain blushed in his cheeks.

Billy shook his head. "Damn, I'm having fun."

* * * *

Jessie threw herself down on the bedroll. Her eyes slipped closed without her permission, tired and swollen from the tears she'd shed privately in the woods. She didn't want Cutter and Billy to see how hurt and vulnerable she still felt, but each time she thought of her father now she couldn't stop the tears from leaking down her cheeks. To suspect he'd been killed had been one thing. To know seemed different. The woman she'd known for ten years, who'd live in her home, slept with her father, pretended to be a dutiful wife had somehow been involved in his murder. For money. Each time she thought of it, the betrayal rose like black bile in her throat and rippled through her body, stinging and prickling like a thousand bee stings. She'd never loved Ellie, never even liked her, but knowing Ellie's entire life with her family had been a sham laid on a foundation of treachery and greed filled Jessie with a sense of loss.

Beneath the heartache rose the wrath, fighting for attention in her mind. The fury swirled and swooped around the pain, dark and deadly, hammering her with the demand for revenge, to see Ellie pay for what she'd done. The temptation for revenge warred for dominance with her entire ideology, but relinquishing herself to that anger seemed too high a price for her soul to pay.

But the grief killed her. Her heart had simply been torn out and shredded. Everything had happened so fast in the last few days—her father's death, Jane's abduction, her bargain with these strange yet endearing men, that gruesome injury, the fire—that she'd barely allowed herself time to mourn. She'd lost the man who'd given her life. He'd been like another part of herself. They'd shared a temperament, their outlook on life, their views and beliefs. Jacob Travers had always loved her no matter what she'd done or said, or perhaps he'd love her because of those things. She'd never know the answer to that.

Her father's image filled her mind—his large, capable body, the green eyes so like her own that twinkled with his laughter and burned bright in anger, waves of thick dark hair curling around the handsomest face in the county. He'd been a leader in his community, a man who'd often put his principles ahead of his own livelihood, a loving father who'd given his future son-in-law a parcel of land to call his own, a mentor to his daughter and son, and apparently a lover who adored a woman that could never be his in the eyes of the world.

She covered her eyes with her arm as fresh tears stung her eyes. "Oh, Pa. I love you so much." She rolled over, buried her face in the blanket and sobbed like a little girl.

When strong arms pulled her against a big chest, she curled into the warmth and protection, dampening Raines' shirt and twisting the fabric in her fingers. She felt Billy's hand caress her hair with soft, soothing strokes, and as the dam of her grief cracked and the heartache burst through, she simply listened to their gentle murmurings and reveled in the comfort they wanted to give. Finally she lifted her head and met their eyes. They were worried about her. She saw that plainly. But they also understood because they held grief in their own hearts.

"What can we do, Jessie?" Billy asked.

"Make me forget this horrible day," she whispered.

She scrambled off Raines' lap and began to strip. She tore at her buttons and yanked the sleeves of her dress down her arms, ignoring the sound of tearing fabric. She stood and wiggled her hips, forcing the material down her legs and kicking it impatiently off the blanket. The wind felt so good on her skin, scouring the grief with rough, chilly fingers. It tumbled her hair, dried the sweat, and caressed the tears on her face, telling her everything would eventually heal.

But it wasn't enough.

She dropped to her knees in front of Billy. Her fingers frantically worked at the buttons of his pants. She tore through them, then wrenched the fabric back and yanked the pants down his hips. Billy uttered a small sound of protest, his hands covering hers.

"Darlin', you're—"

"Shut up, Billy."

She pushed him down to the bedroll and hovered over him for a moment. Raines' hands cupped her shoulders but she shrugged them off. Without more thought than a need to drive everything from her head, she took Billy's cock in her hand, squeezing, then tugging. He moaned and she leaned down, sucking his cock into her mouth. Billy arched toward her and cupped her face. He twisted his fingers in her hair and pulled.

She responded by sucking him deeper, concentrating on the warmth filling her mouth as his cock grew and tightened, tucked in her moist haven. His muscles clenched beneath her fingers as she moved her hands over his abdomen, his hips, his thighs. When she reached between his legs to touch his balls, he drew in a gasping breath and released it with a shudder.

Her body responded to the pleasure in his. Each tug of her mouth on his cock caused her pussy to tighten, to grasp on emptiness. The juices of her want and need tickled her thighs. Her breasts ached, thrusting forward, eager to be touched and tasted. Finally Raines' warm naked flesh pressed against her back and gripped her breasts with his big hands, his warm palms nestling her flesh within them, squeezing with enough pressure to draw her attention, to make her want more.

He toyed with her nipples then pinched them. A shot of fire ripped straight to her pussy. She shoved her hips backwards and met the hard length of his cock behind her, warm, pulsing, swaying toward her.

Her tongue slid up the length of Billy's cock. She planted kisses from his balls to the head of his cock then licked the tip, tasting his Billy-essence, loving the fact that she could make him groan. She rammed her hips backwards.

In a husky voice that didn't sound like her own, she rasped, "Fuck me, Raines."

His response was a cross between a growl and a moan. It sounded like something she'd hear in a jungle, which made no sense because she had no idea what might live in a jungle and no idea how much danger that sound might hold. All she knew was she needed to feel his cock in her pussy, something to stop the ache, the burning, the incredible emptiness.

His big hands gripped her hips so tight she would surely bruise, and wrenched her backwards into his lap. For one moment she lifted and smashed into his chest—broad, hard flesh, a thundering heartbeat. One arm wrapped around her waist and the other hand clutched a fistful of hair, yanking it away from her neck. The backs of her thighs rasped against the hair that bristled on his, felt the taut muscles that flexed and strained. His mouth found her throat. He bit into the tender skin, a small nip, then sucked her flesh as though seeking to pull out her very soul.

Just as quickly he released her, and she fell forward. She caught herself on her hands and knees and once again enveloped Billy's cock in her mouth.

Raines seized her hips again and pulled her back to meet him. He rubbed his cock over the length of her pussy, forcing a moan from her mouth and making her grind against him. The hot, swollen flesh of his cock slid between her lips, pressed against her clit, spreading moisture over the heat that burned between her legs. Finally he pulled away and lunged against her. His cock drove into her body with enough force to slide her up Billy's chest.

Billy took advantage and grabbed her face, covering her mouth with his and kissing her deeply, breathlessly. Raines drew back and pounded into her again, and this time her pussy clenched around him and refused to let go. He tightened his hands around her hips and began to rock, a rhythmic back and forth, their bodies locked tightly together.

She tore her mouth from Billy's and again lowered her face between his legs. Their male scents nearly overwhelmed her, making her dizzy. She reveled in the pure mindless pleasure that swept through her, forgetting the day, the tension, the threats that loomed over her like a dark thundercloud.

Raines reached between her legs. His fingers found her clit, rubbing and pinching, as his cock pressed against something inside her that threatened to tear her apart. As Billy fucked her mouth, his thrusts accelerated to a crescendo. Billy lost control and with a shuddering moan, shot a stream of cum into the back of her throat. The force of it surprised her, but she sucked her lips tight to his cock while it pulsed with each successive load. When he finished coming, she swallowed and continued to suck as tremors ran under his skin, as his fingers twisted in her hair, then softly splayed across her cheek.

When Billy's cock slid from her mouth, Raines cupped her breasts and yanked her against him. His mouth once again found the pulse in her neck. Nestled against his lap, she lifted, then plunged down again

as his finger continued to trace her clit, demanding her response, sending ripples of fire through her entire body. Finally he gripped her hips, holding tight, and pumped her against him, driving her on his cock as it pulsed and grew. She threw back her head and enjoyed taking all he wanted to give. Her pleasure increased with each thrust and movement until finally he yanked her down hard on his cock and held her firmly.

His cock head swelled inside her, spreading her pussy from the inside out. He exploded within her, his cock spasming rhythmically as his seed spilled like hot lava, filling the emptiness, erasing the physical and emotional void. As he groaned, she came with him. Her own body quaked and shook beneath his hands and her entire body shuddered in a blinding, soul-shattering burst of bliss. They both shook violently, and her pussy clamped on his cock, milking the last drop of fluid from his balls. His arms wrapped around her. He didn't caress her. He simply held her while she reveled in each burst, each flicker, each tiny pulse.

She dropped her head back against Raines' shoulder. His fingers touched her jaw, and she turned her head. His lips touched hers, a gentle kiss that brought her back to earth.

"She's so beautiful when that happens," Billy murmured.

"She's beautiful all the time."

Jessie smiled as she gazed at Billy, then Raines. "You're both beautiful to me. I can't imagine any girl luckier than I am."

At that moment the sky opened with a rumble of thunder, and a deluge poured on them. Jessie squealed and jumped to her feet. She hopped up and down, laughing as the cold water dripped over her hot skin, her wet hair sticking to her face. She bolted to the wagon but the men beat her there. Raines spread the blanket under the wagon while Billy started grabbing everything inside and hastily shoved it underneath. Jessie gave Butterscotch a quick rub, crawled underneath and huddled in a ball. The men crawled in after her.

Raines laughed in their makeshift shelter as he wrapped a blanket around her. "You just had to mention luck."

Chapter 12

Jessie smoothed her hands down the front of Billy's jacket, loving the feel of the soft velvety fabric. When she glanced up into his face, she searched his eyes trying to find a trace of Billy. Behind the round spectacles, a bit of devilish spark flashed there for a brief moment to be replaced by a chilling, almost cruel glare. She perused his ruddy cheeks, the stiff black moustache and beard that graced his face, then the smooth, glossy black hair that swept away from his high forehead.

She took a step back. "You look incredibly handsome. But a bit ..." She chewed her bottom lip as she thought. "Scary."

An arched brow rose as his gaze swept over her with a bit of contempt. She stood on tiptoes and pressed her lips against the stern mouth. He laughed and enveloped her in a bear hug.

"Then I've succeeded," he said.

"So what's the plan?" Jessie asked. "What will I have to do?"

"What you do best," Raines said. "Beg, plead, cry, whine—"

She slapped at his chest. "I don't do any of those things."

Raines' lips curled. "Seems you were doing plenty of it last night."

She rolled her eyes. "That hardly counts. You know what you two do to me."

Billy waggled his smooth brows. "We'll just have to consider it good rehearsal, 'cause that's what I need today. And please keep in character. No improvising like yesterday. My foot still hurts."

Jessie offered a smile. "Just trying for a bit of realism. I'm sorry I stomped so hard."

Billy took her shoulders between his hands. "Remember: today is different. We're not dealing with your stepmother. Nathaniel Prentice is a dangerous man who's done evil things and won't hesitate to put a few bullets in our heads if he suspects something. He might be powerful enough to get away with it too. So no funny stuff, okay?" He dropped a kiss on the end of her nose.

She traced a cross over her breast. "No funny stuff, Billy."

Billy adjusted his hat, and when he spoke his voice came out smooth as velvet in a sultry cadence that wrapped around her like a soft, southern summer night. "It's William Malone for today, darlin'. From N'awlins, though I have business dealin's in this glorious state of Kentucky." He bowed with a flourish. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Charmed, sir." She bobbed a little curtsey.

"And that's as nice as Malone gets," Raines said. "Watch out for him. He's a snake charmer and not to be trusted."

Jessie peeked at the mirror on the lid of Billy's case. Her bruised face stared back, unsmiling and stoic, as she adjusted herself to her role. She smoothed her hair back into the braid, and Billy's hand wound around her wrist.

"Leave it. I like it all disheveled like that. Looks like you put up a struggle."

Raines tugged her braid, then swung her around and lifted her into the wagon. "Not that a struggle would stop William Malone from N'awlins. Malone's as villainous as Prentice, if not more so."

Jessie settled on a mound of bedrolls. She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around her knees. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Malone?"

"I sell people," Billy said shortly. He climbed up into the wagon as Raines came forward with a rope.

Jessie scooted backwards. "Oh no, not the rope. Come on. Like the two of you couldn't handle me without tying me up."

"Have to try that later," Raines said, giving her an appraising look. "You didn't seem the type, but you might like it."

"I'm not talking about that," Jessie snapped. "Look at my wrists. They're raw. If I lose any more blood, they'll declare me legally dead."

"That might have happened already," Billy said. "Ellie doesn't look like the type to waste time."

Jessie snorted and held out her arms.

"Turn around."

"No, I want them in the front. I can't—"

Billy froze. "Someone's coming."

Raines gave him a puzzled look as he spun her around. "Don't say a word. I mean it."

"Rebs, Cutter," Billy said.

Raines groaned. "Rebs. What are they doing this far north? You should wear those glasses all the time, Billy. I can't see a damned thing through the trees." He wrapped the rope around her wrist and tugged hard, causing her to grunt in pain. He ran his hands gently over her wounds. "Sorry. Has to look real."

Billy laughed. "I can't see a damned thing in these glasses. It's the song. Can't you hear it?"

Raines cocked his head and murmured, "I can't hear much at all after the cannon fire at Shiloh."

Jessie held her breath and tried to tune out the distractions—the sound of the wind whistling through their campsite, the snorts Butterscotch made as she prepared for company, and the chirping and calling of the birds that gathered the remainder of their breakfast crumbs. Beneath it all she heard a faint chorus of male voices, singing their way through the back roads of a Kentucky county that had seen better days. It sounded like nearly a dozen men. She recognized the song because she'd heard it every time a band of men left the county and headed south to Tennessee to join the Confederate Army.

"It's Rebs," she said. "Definitely."

Raines frowned and gave them each an odd look, then reached for his rifle. "It's Plan B."

"Plan B?" Jessie asked.

"We caught you running a leg of the railroad. We're taking you to Maysville to turn you in to the authorities."

Jessie gulped. "That doesn't sound good. What was Plan A?"

A smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "The disappearance and possible murder of your brother."

"Sounds as though I give Mr. Malone a run for his money in the evil department."

"Indeed, madam," Billy said. "You seem to be a rather, ah, unsavory character. Now, if we can convince them to let us go about our business, we'll head to it." He gave her a little shove, and she fell back against the bedroll. "Remember to keep your mouth shut. Just a little scream to draw attention to yourself so we can get all the annoying questions out of the way."

The clatter of hooves and a barrage of whinnies sounded from the bend in the road ahead. When the men came into view, Jessie stole a glimpse over the edge of the wagon to see a group of about a dozen men, only three on horses. The rest marched along behind, keeping pace and singing their rousing song at the top of their lungs. As they moved closer, Jessie jumped to her feet and began to scream. The man in the lead spurred his horse and careened to a stop beside the wagon. Jessie tried for tears again and this time found them. A hot rush of tears flooded her eyes and leaked down her cheeks. Raines and Billy stared at her for one moment, their eyes wide.

"Boy, she's getting good," Billy whispered.

"Help me!" She dropped to her knees and scooted forward, wincing as splinters stabbed her skin. She fell against the side of the wagon, nearly tipping over the edge, as the lead man dismounted quickly, followed by the other two. The rest of the men jogged forward, juggling heavy packs and weapons.

The leader, wearing a pristine gray uniform that had obviously not yet seen a battle of any kind, and so young he had peach fuzz on his face, rushed forward, his hand on the butt of his pistol. His dark brown eyes skimmed her swollen and bruised face, and a look of compassion settled on his face. His wary gaze traveled between Billy and Raines as he straightened his shoulders.

"Explain, gentlemen."

Raines nodded in greeting. "Lieutenant."

"Colson," the young man said. He adjusted his coat. "Newly commissioned and soon to be in the service of the Confederate Army."

"Congratulations, Lieutenant. You'll do your country proud I'm sure. Name's Raines. This is William Malone."

"And the woman?"

"Our prisoner."

The Lieutenant's glance dropped to the rifle. His eyes widened. "That's a fine rifle, sir."

"It is," Raines said. "Henry Repeating. Just got it."

"Very expensive firearm. The Confederate Army has nothing so fine. I envy you." He inspected the length of the rifle then his glance flickered back to Jessie, as though he'd forgotten his own question. "And for what reason is this woman being detained?"

"I didn't do anything!" Jessie cried.

Raines gave her a sharp look, and she closed her mouth. "Mr. Malone lost some property. We found that property in this woman's possession. She owns a farm near here and was running a leg of the railroad."

The Lieutenant's face hardened and his eyes skimmed her with disgust. He pulled his hat down further over his shock of flaxen hair. "In this county? That's a dangerous thing to do. Things are hard enough here without that sort of interference. The North won't be happy until the entire south is destitute and unlivable. People like this

woman," he gave her a glance that told her exactly what he thought of her politics, "will ruin this state."

"We agree, sir," Billy said, "which is why we're escortin' this woman to Maysville. I'm pressin' charges personally. We intend to see she suffers the consequences for interferin' with our livelihoods here in the South."

Colson nodded. "As it should be. And the property?"

"Recovered," Billy said, then nodded toward Raines. "Gave my hunter a merry chase, though he had little trouble trackin' them. My property is now safely with the rest of my men bein' escorted to the Ohio for the journey home."

Colson paused for only a moment. "And where did you say home was, Mr. Malone?"

"N'awlins, sir, though lately I've been in Lexington on business. I'd brought several pieces of my property, and they took advantage—

The young officer surged forward eagerly, his cheeks flushing with color. The down on his cheeks glowed golden in the morning sun. "Lexington? Then you might know Colonel John Morgan, sir?" Jessie's heart sank when several other men came forward at the mention of Morgan's name. She wished she'd seen such enthusiasm in the Union soldiers of Kentucky.

"Of course I know the Colonel," Billy said. "A great leader and an even finer man."

"I hear he's running skirmishes, beating the Yanks back further every day," one soldier said.

Another man shouldered the first aside. "And he's set to get a promotion. He'll be a general soon, I vow."

"Indeed, sirs," Billy said. "A yes to both your questions."

"So you follow his campaigns, sir?" Colson asked.

"Who doesn't follow Morgan's passage? His strikes are lethal and his cunnin' beyond anythin' the Union Army can employ or train. His

myth has already surpassed that of the Swamp Fox further south. Morgan's name is legendary in Kentucky and beyond."

Colson's dark eyes burst with youthful exuberance. "We hope to join Morgan's raiders." He glanced back at the saddle bag on his horse and frowned. "Though I don't know whether my letters will be sufficient introduction."

Billy spread his hands. "Ah, Lieutenant, the Colonel and I are old friends, business acquaintances. Should you need any form of personal recommendation, I would be more than pleased to honor you with that. Seems the least I can do for a man so eager to help his country by retainin' the integrity of its culture."

Colson smiled as a man behind him clapped him on the back. The Lieutenant, in his enthusiasm, turned and smiled at his men. "Oh, Mr. Malone, if you would, I—"

"Say no more, sir." Billy turned and barked, "Raines, bring me my writin' desk."

Jessie smirked when Raines rolled his eyes and leaned into the wagon. He reached into a saddle bag and withdrew another small wooden chest. How much baggage did these men carry with them? They seemed prepared for almost anything.

"He loves bossing you around," she whispered. "Don't you want to get even?"

"Don't even think about it," Raines growled.

She cocked a brow and wiggled closer to the edge of the wagon. "But, sir! These men are lying. You haven't even spoken to me. Please, can't you—"

Billy shot her a warning glare as he moved to the back of the wagon.

Colson's dark eyes blazed when they swung toward her. "Madam, cease. It's clear you are a traitor to your state and the people of this county."

"I'm not! I—"

Raines surprised her by stuffing the gag into her mouth. "Now back up, sit down and behave yourself."

She didn't move back. She followed Billy, sliding on her knees. Raines lowered the loading gate and set down the small writing desk. Billy snapped open the lid, pulled open the drawer and flipped through the pages of stationery. He withdrew a pristine white sheet, then lifted a small compartment and after several moments began to write on the paper. She moved closer to Billy and inspected the sheet. The words William Malone scrolled across the top of the page in fancy script writing. Behind her she listened to the small contingent as they eagerly discussed their luck today and their eventual acceptance into Morgan's 2nd Kentucky Cavalry.

John Hunt Morgan and his raiders had done nothing but encourage the people of Kentucky to turn their backs on their country and stand behind the horrible social practices that permeated the south. But she didn't think the young lieutenant and his cohorts would want to listen to her philosophy right now. They hung with bated breath waiting for their personal introduction to their hero.

Billy finished writing, waved the letter to dry the ink. He folded it carefully and slid it inside a beautiful cover with the initials W.M. After sealing it, he slapped it into Colson's hand.

"May luck go with you, Lieutenant, and may this help you achieve the future you so richly deserve."

Colson held out his hand, and Billy shook it, then the three men mounted their horses and led the way past the wagon. When they vanished around the line of trees, Raines turned to Billy.

"The future he deserves?"

Billy shrugged as he pulled the gag from Jessie's mouth. "I wrote 'Greetings from Abraham Lincoln and the Army of the Tennessee.' That was your army, right, Cutter?"

"Someday, Billy, you're going to get us killed."

"Well, Cutter, if you'd stop being such a pussy, I wouldn't have to do your job."

Jessie laughed and lost her balance, falling on her ass. Raines simply turned and climbed into the wagon, muttering to himself.

* * * *

Nathaniel Prentice was the wealthiest man in Maysville and probably in the entire northern half of Kentucky. His plantation, Riverbend, covered thousands of acres of prime land, encompassing foothills, farm lands and river frontage. When the wagon clattered off the main road, Jessie knew they'd entered Prentice's property because the wagon glided smoothly over the road beneath them. She stared up into the sky, watching the colorful boughs of the giant trees—red, orange, yellow, green—flow past her like a scattering rainbow. Occasionally she caught glimpses of the swollen gray clouds moving briskly in the darkening sky. It had grown cooler and with the coming storm, she didn't look forward to sleeping in a wet field again that night. It looked as though the sky would burst at any moment.

Although the road allowed faster travel it still took them almost an hour to reach Prentice's house. The mansion was poised on the banks of the Ohio, a grand columned plantation house rising three stories and surrounded by a tiered veranda. Rows of French doors on each floor opened to allow the cool river breezes to flow unhampered through the rooms. For one moment Jessie thought how wonderful it would have been to live in a house like this, to give her father and brother a chance to live a comfortable life instead of working so hard every day.

She sat up. She'd had the opportunity to live here, to become the wife of the most important man in northern Kentucky. She'd almost accepted until she'd seen ... what? Something in Nathaniel's eyes had knocked the yes from her mind and turned it into a sudden and resounding no. Two weeks later her father's foreman had asked her to be his wife and she'd accepted quickly and willingly. She and Frank McGee had been married the next month.

If she'd married Nathaniel, would her father still be alive? Would Jane be safe and Martin happy? Would Frank have stayed on the Travers plantation and continued to work hard to keep her father's fields thriving instead of running off to fight a war because she couldn't do it herself? Had she killed two men and ruined the lives of so many others simply because she'd been afraid of the spark of cruelty she'd seen in Nathaniel's eyes and hadn't been able to accept that he held an entirely different worldview than she did?

Based on what Raines and Billy said, she'd made the right decision for herself. He was a bad man who did bad things. But if she'd known the consequences of saying no, she wasn't so sure she would have refused him. Being safe didn't seem enough of a trade for all the heartache she'd caused and all she'd lost. Her stomach roiled. The last thing she wanted to do was see Nathaniel Prentice.

When the wagon reached the wide veranda and Butterscotch came to a halt, Billy turned and gave her a wink.

"Show time."

Raines swung her over the side and dropped her feet to the ground, then tugged on upper arm. She turned and reluctantly followed Billy up the stairs, protesting and wiggling as Raines pushed against her back. Nervous, she nearly tripped on the steps, but Raines caught her.

"Nice touch," he said.

She nodded and raised her face. Nathaniel's elegant figure stood in the doorway, a sudden burst of sunlight streaming through the foyer behind him causing his golden hair to glow like a halo. He wore a gray silk waistcoat and dark trousers, shining boots and a shirt more brilliant than the first mountain snow. Her eyes skimmed the length of the man, and she found herself staring into the cold gray eyes of Nathaniel Prentice's handsome face. His glance barely grazed the two men. It swung back quickly and locked on her.

He stepped aside, opening the door wider. "Mr. Malone, Mr. Raines. How nice to see you again. Gentlemen, please come in." He

swept an arm to indicate the foyer. Billy gave a small bow and stepped inside.

"I don't understand. Do you—" Jessie stammered. Confused, she watched Billy's retreating back and turned to Raines. He stared straight ahead. When her eyes returned to Prentice, his brow rose, and he gave Jessie a predatory smile.

"Find yourself in a bit of trouble, Mrs. McGee? Why doesn't that surprise me?"

She barely heard him. Her knees buckled. Raines gripped her elbow and hauled her over to the threshold and into the lion's den.

* * * *

Raines pushed Jessie into a wingback chair and settled against the wall next to her. He'd felt the strength leave her legs when Prentice said their names. He'd grabbed her arm before she fell to her knees. Her suddenly clammy skin shocked him and the tremors running through her body left him feeling guilty. He and Billy had talked about filling her in on their first meetings with Prentice, but knowing Jessie's tendency to improvise, they'd decided against it. As much as it betrayed her trust, they'd wanted her fear to be real and her apprehension to keep her from opening her mouth and making a mistake.

She sat bolt upright, stock still, except for her hands. Her fingers twisted with one another behind her back, and he heard a few clicking noises as her knuckles cracked with the force. Small beads of sweat dotted her forehead, and a tiny rivulet moved slowly down the slender column of her throat.

"I see you didn't have any trouble finding her," Prentice said.

"No, Nate," Billy said. "No problem at all. She practically fell into our laps."

Prentice laughed. "Must be that southern charm of yours, William." He walked to a mahogany sideboard and lifted a crystal

decanter. He poured brandy into a snifter and smelled it deeply, sighing. He poured more then filled two more glasses. "You'll like this. Just got the shipment from New York. Damned hard to get shipments lately. Cost me a fucking fortune."

He handed one to Billy, then walked toward Raines. Raines held up his hand. "Not wise for me to drink on the job."

"You're missing out on the finest brandy on this continent."

"Mr. Raines is testy enough sober, Nate," Billy said. "Don't tempt him. I would prefer to get out of this county without havin' to bribe a local official. Better ways to spend my money."

Prentice chuckled. "Indeed."

He reached out and brushed a hand across Jessie's cheek. A choked sob came from the wingback chair. Raines moved a little closer. Prentice glared at him.

"She's not yours yet, Mr. Prentice," Raines said.

"So right, Mr. Raines." His gaze returned to Jessie. Raines gritted his teeth at the heated stare he gave her, and his fist tightened against his thigh. Jessie stared at her lap, but her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She held her breath for a moment, releasing it with a shudder when Prentice moved back to the desk. He slid open a drawer. "Perhaps we should take care of that little business now?"

"About that," Billy said. He leaned back in his chair, adjusting his glasses.

Prentice's head shot up. "Yes, William?" He slowly closed the drawer. "Have you upped your price after seeing the prize?"

Billy crossed his leg over his knee and took a sip of brandy. "Not exactly ..."

Prentice straightened, and his voice was curt, cold. "Then what are you talking about?"

Billy stared into his glass for a moment. "I want to change the price entirely."

"You can't change our bargain in mid-stream, William. You've brought me the girl."

His stare shifted to Jessie and Raines saw the hunger in his eyes. Whatever this man had in mind for Jessie's future, it certainly included a few nights in his bed. If not a permanent place.

Over my dead body.

"I object to this, William. Strenuously. If you plan to have future dealings with me then forget whatever terms you're considering and agree to our original price. I don't play these sorts of games." Prentice yanked open the drawer and pulled out a velvet pouch, tossing it on the desk.

Billy inspected his nails. "I can always release the girl. Of course, that could create problems."

"For both of us," Prentice snarled.

"Doubtful," Billy said. "I live in N'awlins, Nate, a long distance and several battlefields and generals away. It's a simple abduction at this point. Almost forgivable in this turbulent time we live in. Mistakes can be made in the heat of the moment. Wouldn't you agree?"

Prentice ground his teeth together. "No, I would not."

Billy took a sip of brandy. He closed his eyes as a blissful smile crossed his face. Raines stifled a smile. He thought Billy a far better actor than John Wilkes Booth. He hoped someday everyone knew it, and Billy managed to get his top billing.

"This is excellent brandy, Nate. You must tell me the name of your purveyor."

"Marks and Son. Broadway," Prentice said between clenched teeth.

"Excellent," Billy said. "What was I saying?"

Prentice perched on the edge of his desk, the snifter gripped tightly in his fist. He hadn't taken a drink for a while. "You were talking about mistakes. Which this is not."

"Oh, yes. Mistakes. I feel sure, should this all come to the light of day, I can manage a suitable reason for detainin' the young woman, perhaps even for bringin' her to you." He touched his temple. "You might be surprised how imaginative I am."

Billy, you never cease to amaze me.

Raines chewed on his lip, trying hard not to smile. He had no idea why he had a hard time *not* smiling lately. His gaze shifted to Jessie, who wasn't smiling at all. In fact, her beautiful mouth trembled, and he suddenly wanted to pick her up and charge from the room. He hated himself for doing this to her, but they were so close to ending the twisted business Prentice pursued.

Prentice's hard, clipped voice brought him back to the game. He lifted his eyes back to the man he'd been trying to get for the last three months.

"I don't give a fuck about your imagination, Malone."

"Perhaps not," Billy murmured. He twirled the snifter and watched Prentice through the glass. "But what about the facts, Nate? Would you give a fuck about them?"

Prentice slammed his snifter onto the desk and brandy sloshed over the rim, spilling onto his hand and the desk. He smeared the dark liquid on his trousers. "Talk plain."

"As I was sayin', I can probably come up with *some* reason for this little faux pas—"

"Jesus Christ, William. Just spit it out."

Billy downed the last of his brandy in a gulp. He set the glass on the side table next to his chair. Raines loved the cool, elegant Billy. Such a performance. He'd buy Billy a case of brandy after this. Maybe two.

"Fine, Nate, I'll spit it out. You have quite an enterprisin' endeavor here. I don't presume to know the details of that business—

"And you won't."

Billy spread his hands. "Of course not, just as I would never tell you the details of my own. Each man makes and sleeps in his own bed and should be comfortable there. But," he settled back in the chair, "I

do know you're at the end of a very long road—or should I say railroad?—and come into the best merchandise. Very valuable merchandise. Courageous, spirited, independent. All fine attributes and all at your disposal to supply to your ... ah, clients for a very high price."

"And?" Prentice barked.

"I'd hate to have to interfere with that. I've no real desire to leave N'awlins but when opportunity presents itself—"

"Are you blackmailing me, Malone?"

Billy laughed. "Of course not! I'm merely pointin' out what you stand to lose."

"Go on," Prentice said.

Billy paused. "I've also never killed anyone." He glanced at Raines. "Not yet anyway."

Raines shifted around the wingback, pleased when Prentice finally realized the severity of his problem. He moved around to the back of his desk, where he probably had a pistol concealed. Raines made sure the Henry was more visible. He rubbed the barrel.

"You might want to stay where you are, Mr. Prentice. Listen to Mr. Malone."

Prentice spread his hands in a calming gesture and came back around the desk, leaning back against it. "I had no idea you were that serious, William. But for the record, I haven't killed anyone." He paused and winked at Raines. "Lately."

"That's not what I hear," Billy said. "We paid Mrs. Travers a visit earlier."

Prentice's brows shot up. He ran a hand through his shiny hair. "Why would you do that?"

Raines continued rubbing his rifle. He peered at Prentice through a lock of hair, trying to keep his eyes hidden. "There was the matter of the boy. We couldn't find him."

A tiny gasp escaped through Jessie's lips.

"Definitely a loose end," Prentice said. "But not something I can't handle later." He smiled, revealing brilliant teeth, and folded his arms across his chest. Raines watched him struggle to bring this game back around to his advantage. An amused smile settled on Prentice's lips, but Raines knew he was bluffing. "What on earth did Ellie tell you?"

"It's more what she didn't tell us," Raines said.

Billy shifted in his chair. "Mrs. Travers seems to be quite the merry widow. Not behavin' like a woman who's lost a husband, her property and her future a mere days before. In fact, I'd say she's downright giddy."

"Ellie's a strange woman." Prentice shook his head and glanced at Jessie.

Raines toyed with the trigger of the rifle and shot a glance toward her. A tear tracked its way down her cheek. He lifted his eyes back to Prentice. "Mrs. Travers seemed to think you might be responsible for her husband's death."

"Goddamn her!" Prentice roared. He lurched away from the desk and began to pace, muttering to himself. "What game is she playing? I'll shoot that goddamned son-of-a-bitch Morris. Jesus Christ, what a mess."

He stopped at a window and slammed his hand against the pane of glass. It shattered and a trickle of blood spread down the pane. He never noticed. He spun around and pointed at Billy.

"If Ellie thinks this blackmail will work, she's going to be one sorry bitch."

Raines smiled when he heard Jessie mutter, "She's always been a sorry bitch." But her face lifted, and she tilted her head, studying Prentice.

"You really did it?" she asked. "You killed my father?"

Prentice's face swung toward her. He blinked as though he'd forgotten she sat in the room. She stood up and took several steps.

"Not exactly," he said. He smiled slightly, as though dealing with a wayward child. "But your father threatened to uproot all my hard

work here. Besides, there was the little matter of wanting *you*. I could hardly plan this abduction, Jessie, with your father in the way. He'd have only tried to find you."

She simply folded. Raines lunged forward and caught her, sweeping her against him. He looked down at her still face and drew back slightly when she opened her eyes a slit, gave him a quick smile and winked. He barely had time to stifle another smile when Prentice took the opportunity to move to the desk. Before he reached the corner, Raines dumped Jessie in the chair and aimed his rifle at Prentice. The other man froze.

"Let's finish this meeting, Mr. Malone. Seems Mr. Prentice is getting impatient."

Billy stood. "You still want her, Nate?" He glanced to where Jessie slumped in the wingback. "She's a lovely girl and quite feisty. A bit of a challenge, but she has many fine attributes that would increase her value. If you don't want her, I'd have no trouble findin'—"

"Stop!" Prentice's gaze locked on Jessie then darted between the two men. He licked his lips and ran a hand through his hair. "I, yes, I still want her."

Billy walked behind the desk. Raines kept his eyes locked on Prentice. When Billy picked up the pouch, he weighed it gently in his hand, bouncing it up and down. The jingle of coins drifted through the room like a soft melody. Jessie rolled her head against the arm of the chair. Raines wanted this over with quickly before she did something foolish.

Billy smiled and tucked the pouch into his jacket. "Then you'll have her, Nate." He tapped his finger against his lips. "But I want the other one in exchange. The woman Ellie told me about. Her name was..." He cocked his head and glanced at Raines.

"Jane," Raines said.

"Yes, that's right. Jane. I think you already have her in your possession. Isn't that right?"

Prentice's eyes widened and he scratched his head. A grin split across his face. "You want a slave woman?" He nodded at Jessie. "In exchange for *her*?"

"Yes," Billy said simply. "I have other clients, ones with certain requirements. She sounded perfect for a man I know from Cincinnati." Billy waved his hand. "Of course, he wouldn't keep her there. How would that look, with Ohio bein' a free state and all?" Billy winked.

"I think I can arrange it," Prentice said. He sat on the edge of the desk again, his eyes never leaving Jessie's still body. "I'll send a messenger. Where—"

"The hotel in—" Billy strode across the room, then paused and spun around. "Oh, one other thing." He held up his finger.

"And what's that, William?"

"There was some other property taken from Mrs. Travers. Is that correct?"

Prentice waved his hand. "Some jewelry, silver, a few pieces of furniture. Inconsequential. Hardly worth my time."

Billy shook his head. "Not the articles. Slaves."

"Several, I believe," Prentice said. "I didn't really pay attention. Only Jane caught my eye. I saw great potential there. Ellie practically begged me to take her away."

"Yes, well, Mrs. Travers still doesn't care what happens to Jane. Something about her husband, but I truly didn't listen. I'm certainly not interested in a woman's company for her chatterin' mouth." Prentice nodded knowingly. "She does, however, need the other slaves back on her property. I told her I'd see what I could do for her. Seemed only fittin'. A lady supportin' the cause shouldn't have to struggle. We want to help our own."

Prentice frowned. "Why would you give a fuck about a woman in this county, William?"

"Exactly, Nate!" Billy smiled. "Why would I give a fuck?"

Prentice wagged his finger. "You're a sly one, William. Does Ellie fulfill some requirements of your own?"

"I don't kiss and tell, Nate. But I'd be eternally grateful if she were a little less bitchy."

Prentice nodded. "I'll see what I can do. There were three others I believe?"

"Four, actually. Four would make the lady incredibly happy and consequently," he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "I would be incredibly happy. It would make any subsequent business we have together far more comfortable for me."

"I'll take care of it," Prentice said. "I have Jane elsewhere. The others are reasonably close, still in my possession. Shall I have them delivered to Ellie tomorrow?"

Billy tapped his lip, as his gaze strayed to Jessie. "No, I'd like to surprise her myself. Perhaps ... Yes, that would work. Deliver them to the McGee farm. Raines has been stayin' there in the event the boy shows up. I'll have Raines drive them back to Ellie while I'm there. Should make her very *grateful*." He winked and patted his pocket. "I'll return to pick Jane up in three days and will bring Mrs. McGee back for you to keep. Is that enough time?"

"It should be, William."

"As always, Nate, a great pleasure. Marks and Son?"

Raines lifted Jessie and cradled her against his chest. He watched as Billy and Prentice spoke quietly for a moment and shook hands, then he followed Billy's laughter out the door.

Chapter 13

When the rope dropped from her wrists, Jessie burst into laughter and dove over the side of the wagon, directly into Billy's waiting arms. He swung her in circles and joined in her laughter.

"You were brilliant!" She planted a huge kiss on his mouth before he set her down on the ground. "Absolutely brilliant!"

"Not as brilliant as you," Billy said. "That fainting scene nearly undid me. And those tears. They looked so real I almost cried with you."

"Where did you learn that accent? I'd swear you—"

Raines jumped from the wagon. "Can we hold the reviews for later?"

Jessie hurled herself into his arms. He caught her and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and dropped a kiss on his forehead. "Your performance was very good too."

"Cutter never acts." Billy laughed. "He always plays his handsome, dangerous self."

"Oh, he's not so dangerous." Jessie pulled off his hat and tossed it to the ground. She ruffled his hair until he yanked away from her. "He's like a growling little puppy dog."

"Enough," he snarled, twisting his head away.

She wound her hands through the hair at the nape of his neck and gave an exaggerated sigh. "My hero." She laughed again "I can't believe you caught me so fast. I was afraid I'd knock myself out."

Raines smirked. "I was afraid you'd keep talking. I would have knocked you out myself."

Billy made a face like he'd eaten something sour. "I was afraid I'd have to drink more brandy. Prentice has the worst taste in everything. Except women, of course." He put his hands on his hips and gazed down the road, suddenly serious. "I was also afraid he'd suspect something. But I think we pulled it off." He turned to Jessie. "Sorry about all that though. We weren't sure how it would go and thought it best you not know."

Jessie nodded. "I was frightened in the beginning. It actually crossed my mind you might ..."

Billy tugged on her braid. "We would never do something like that."

She brightened as Raines set her on the ground. "I know. So when I sat down, I thought about self-control."

"A fucking miracle," Raines said.

"How long have you been planning this?" Jessie asked.

Raines brushed his hands over Butterscotch. "Months. We suspected Prentice had gotten involved in smuggling women out of this area. William Malone introduced himself about six weeks ago wanting to open dialogue about a possible business venture. Prentice has a contact in New Orleans, but the man apparently takes a very large percentage. Malone offered to take less. Of course Prentice is not the trusting sort and wanted a show of good faith."

Jessie gulped. "Apparently me."

Billy smiled. "Well, you do have your charms. Seems Prentice didn't take your no on the marriage proposal well. He was determined to have you. Imagine our surprise when we're hired by the very woman we've been asked to abduct. It got pretty confusing there for awhile."

Raines glanced over his shoulder. "Prentice is obsessed with you. That makes him dangerous."

"It's possible he's just obsessed with our land," Jessie said.

Raines shook his head. "Doubtful. Oh, I think he did plan to buy Ellie out, but I think the land is a bonus. A man doesn't look at a woman like he looked at you for a piece of land." He clenched his fists against Butterscotch's flank. Jessie laid her hands over his and soothed the tension across his knuckles. He studied her face. "I'm curious about something."

"What's that?" Jessie asked.

"Why did you refuse his marriage proposal?"

"Several reasons." She tilted her head as she thought back to why she would refuse a man who could seemingly give her the world. "He came around our farm quite a bit when I was younger. He and my father did business together. He had always seemed fairly perfect to me. He was handsome and charming, paid attention to me and seemed interested in everything about me. And of course he was rich as sin. Very tempting after watching how hard my father worked. Over time he made the assumption we would be married, and I never told him no. One day we got into a political discussion and," she laughed, "you know how I can get."

"One of your more charming attributes," Billy said.

Jessie shook her head. "Nathaniel didn't think so. Had he told me to put away my childish ideals, I might have accepted those words from a wealthy southern man. My father had been very clear there was a time and place for everything, and we'd not reached either yet in Kentucky. But Nathaniel told me in very plain terms I was wrong. After that I watched him carefully for his behavior toward people. I discovered very quickly he had a different view of what a person is than I did."

"As do others," Raines said.

Jessie nodded. "That's true, and I know I can't change everyone's views. But I could never marry a man who wouldn't listen to mine, who wouldn't be open to the *idea* of change. And I certainly couldn't marry a man who treated my best friend as though she were property."

"Jane?"

Jessie sighed when she nodded. "The day we found Nathaniel had cornered Jane and expected her to, tried to ..." Irritation welled within her, fueling the hurt and pain of that day. She began to pace, trying to distance herself from the memory. "He told me that day we had to get married immediately. He said there was only so much a man could take, and I'd put him off too long. Something in his eyes told me his treatment of women did not depend on her social status or her wealth, a legal marriage or even the color of her skin. All women were property to him. He was simply waiting until he owned me as well."

Billy reached into his pocket and pulled out the jasper. He stared at it intently for a minute then dropped it back inside. "What makes a man think like that?"

She shook her head, trying to remove the memory. "I don't know, Billy. I don't think it's something I can ever understand. My father told Nathaniel not to come back. I thought at the time he was simply protecting me, but I understand why now. It wasn't about me. Not really. He couldn't stand the way Nathaniel had looked at Jane. She was so much more to my father. He loved her. Maybe more than even I do."

Billy kissed the top of her head. "Impossible. I can't imagine anyone having more love than you."

She squeezed his hand. "I think you do, Billy."

"Not yet, but I'm working on it."

"So what's the next step?" Jessie asked.

"We wait for the group to be taken back to your farm," Raines said. "Then we go get Jane."

"Great," Billy said. "It's about fucking time."

"But we don't know where she is," Jessie said.

Raines swung up into the wagon. "We know where she is."

Billy climbed aboard and held out his hand to Jessie. "Hush-hush and all that."

"You two make me crazy." She huffed as she grabbed his arm, and he pulled her up, spilling her across his lap. He buried his face into her neck and growled.

"But in the good way, right?"

She giggled then lifted her face. Raines stared over his shoulder. She gave him a smile. "Definitely in the good way."

* * * *

Raines pulled the wagon off the road near sundown and headed to the river. The wind had picked up and pushed the darker clouds over the horizon and with it had come a warmer breeze. Glad it wouldn't rain again, he chose a spot where the river coiled and created a small bay-like area. After they built the fire, Billy put away his props and started supper. Jessie unfurled the bedrolls, and he tended to Butterscotch.

When he had the mare unbridled, fed and watered, he stretched out on his blanket. "She's about worn out."

"She's got a heart of gold," Jessie said. "She'd do anything for me."

He chuckled. "As long as anything involves a nice, long nap."

"Oh, quit picking on her. Look at her over there. She's staring at you like a woman in love."

Raines shifted up on his elbow and stared across the field. "Reminds me of my first girl. All that long, golden hair and those sultry brown eyes." Butterscotch snorted. "Sounds like her too."

Jessie laughed. "You've good taste. Butterscotch is a beauty. What was her name?"

"Who?"

Jessie glanced up shyly. "Your first girl."

"Oh, well, I don't really remember. Might have been Elise, or Elsa, something like that."

Jessie huffed and plucked a leaf-plate from Billy's outstretched hand. "How can you not remember the name of your first girl?"

He smiled. "The spaniel was twelve years old when I was born, Jessie. She died before I was five. I'm lucky I remember her at all."

She held the leaf up to her nose. "Smells delicious, Billy, thanks. And you," she turned to Raines, her lips pursed, "you're incorrigible."

He tweaked her nose. "I think you like my incorrigibility, Mrs. McGee."

Jessie kept her attention focused on her meal. Finally she glanced at him. "I do," she said softly.

He sat up and took his own supper. "I like yours too."

* * * *

After eating they stripped off their clothes with the exuberance of children and dove into the water. Even months later, it still held the last warmth of the summer's sun. Jessie knew in another few weeks even the top inches would cool quickly and swimming would not be fun at all. They swam in the moonlight, floating leisurely on the gentle brush of small waves, listening to the night around them and the occasional splash of a fish investigating the intruders. They talked quietly about their lives, asking and answering questions with an easy familiarity and complete honesty. She didn't doubt their honesty. Not a bit.

They touched and kissed, reveling in the feel of each other's skin. When Billy said he wanted a real swim and disappeared into the dark waters, Raines gathered her up against him and lifted her. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. He slid his cock inside her, stroking in and out in gentle, almost loving movements. She tucked her face into the crook of his neck and relaxed against him, smelling the river on his skin, feeling the soft caress of his hair as it blew against her face. When a coil of tension built up inside, she clutched him tighter and basked in the flickers of

delight that rippled through her. As his movements became more urgent, she clung to his strong body until her body convulsed in his arms. His mouth locked on hers, smothering her cries in a searing kiss as they both came in the quiet night.

Jessie finally waded out of the water, wrung out her hair, and threw herself down naked on a blanket near the bank. She stared into the starry sky, watching the light of the full moon appear and disappear behind the clouds that moved slowly toward the east. When the men came out of the river a few minutes later, they lay on either side of her in companionable silence. Eventually Raines threaded his fingers through hers. Billy propped himself up on his elbow and combed her hair with his fingers.

The cool air did nothing to quench the fire building inside of her. Their simple touches burned her from the inside out. She sat up and faced them. She trailed her hand down Raines' chest, down his abdomen until she reached his cock. Swollen, it jutted stiffly from his body. Wrapping her hand around him, she squeezed, laughing. Her laughter sounded husky in the stillness.

"This for me?" she asked.

"Any time you're ready."

She turned to Billy. "Got anything for me, Billy?" Before he could answer, she ran her hand down his body and found another stiff, swollen cock. "I think we're going to have to do something about this, gentlemen."

"What'd you have in mind?" Raines asked. His voice held a rough edge.

Her voice came out as a near whisper. "Something different. Something where I can truly enjoy both of you at the same time. I don't even know if it's possible."

They both sat up at the same time, almost too quickly. She suspected from the look on their faces that what she had on her mind might actually *be* possible. It sounded a little scary, but she sure wanted to try it.

"There is something," Billy said softly. "And it's more than possible. I sure as hell want to try it. Cutter?"

"If it's what I'm thinking, she might have a little trouble with it. But I guess we could try."

Billy jumped to his feet. "Hold on a minute. I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the darkness.

"Sure about this?" Raines asked.

Jessie huffed. "You're taking all the romance out of it, Cutter. Stop trying to scare me."

"Well, it's not—"

"Just shut up," she growled. "Let me decide what I can and can't do. I want you both tonight. That's all there is to it."

"Suit yourself. I'm just—"

Billy reappeared into the circle of light, panting slightly. He held a small jar. "Some cream I use when my skin gets sore from the glue. Helps soften and lubricate." He waved it back and forth. "Sound okay?"

"Sounds perfect," Jessie said. "That is, if Cutter's not too *afraid* to try this."

"Damn it, woman, I'm looking out for you."

Billy turned his stare onto Raines' face. "And I'm looking out for you. Which is why I'm giving you the choice."

Raines moaned. "Oh, fuck, Billy, I don't know."

"You think about it. I'm going to be busy for the next few minutes."

Billy dropped to the blanket and gripped her legs. He pulled until Jessie lost her balance and fell onto her back. She giggled hysterically as he began to kiss his way up her shins, dropping more on her knees, then continuing up her thighs. His hands followed. When he reached her thighs, he pushed them apart and buried his head between her legs. Jessie arched her back as his tongue touched her clit. She pushed herself tighter against him and laughed suddenly.

"Oh, dear God, Billy, you are so great at this."

"How would you know for sure?" Raines asked.

She laughed again and lifted up to see him. "I don't have to know for sure. I can feel it. It's absolutely wonderful. Some day Billy is going to make someone a very lucky woman."

Billy didn't move from between her legs. "I'm only interested in making you lucky, darlin'." The vibration of his voice caused a shudder to flicker through the lower half of her body. Her head dropped down to the blanket and hit hard.

"Ow!" She laughed again.

"You two have too much fun with this," Raines said. "It's like you're two kids playing at some game."

Billy's voice sent another vibration thrumming through her. "It's supposed to be fun, Cutter." He licked her clit, and she shivered. "You should try this sometime."

"Can't seem to beat you to it," Raines said.

"You keep doing that, Billy," Jessie said, "and I'm going to quiver right off this blanket."

Billy gripped her hips. "You're not going anywhere, darlin'. Now put your feet on my shoulders."

She hurried to do what he asked. He spread her legs further apart and stopped talking, putting all his effort into his work. He shoved his hands under her ass and lifted. He slid his tongue down her slit and sucked her pussy lips into his mouth one at a time. With her legs on his shoulders, her pussy was spread wide, and he pressed his tongue inside and started fucking her with his tongue. She thrust her hips up to his mouth, matching the rhythm of his tongue.

Billy licked back up her slit until his mouth latched onto her clit with a vengeance, sucking until her body lifted off the blanket and slammed back down. She thought her heart would burst through her chest. The blood ripped through her veins, and sweat dotted her brow. She trembled when two of his fingers slipped inside her pussy, driving hard. He sucked her clit hard again, and her entire body

quaked as her pussy spasmed around his fingers, and a wave of intense pulses shattered through her.

When she let out a huge sigh, Billy lifted his head. "She's more than ready."

"Ready?" she gasped. She lifted to her elbows. "I think I'm done." Billy shook his head. "Oh no, darlin'. Not by a long shot. Make up your mind, Cutter?"

"Yep."

Billy rolled his eyes. "And?"

Raines picked up the jar of cream. "I plan to beat you to something for once. I'm going to do it."

Billy climbed up Jessie's body and gave her a kiss. She tasted herself on his lips. "Gotta tell you, that man is pure sacrifice." He threw himself on the blanket. "Get on top of me, Jessie."

She rolled over and straddled him, grabbing his swollen cock. She couldn't resist. She leaned down and swiped her tongue across the tip. Billy lurched beneath her and gulped in a huge gasp of air. She gave him another kiss then slowly lowered herself onto his cock, relishing the sensation as her soaked pussy engulfed it with ease, laughing and throwing back her head with the sheer joy of the contact.

Raines moved behind her and his breath fanned across her skin. He whispered huskily against her neck, "Might not be laughing in a minute, honey."

She leaned back against his chest and gave him a smile. "Oh, Cutter, don't be such a chicken. I'll be fine."

His mouth came down on hers hard, stealing her breath and half of her reason. Billy wiggled beneath her, pushing his cock further inside and drawing her back to reality.

Raines kissed her jaw, nipping at her skin, then put his hand on the back of her head and pushed her gently toward Billy. She lay on his chest and his arms wrapped around her. She waited breathlessly while Raines smoothed his hands over her ass, gently stroking her flesh. When he spread her cheeks, she felt a cool, creamy substance coat her flesh. She shivered slightly at both the sensation and the intrusion, a tight gulp locked in her throat.

A finger slid inside her ass, slowly, methodically, gently. She tensed and clenched against the invasion. Billy tightened his arms around her.

"Just relax, darlin'," Billy whispered in her ear. "We're going to take care of you."

As she grew accustomed to the foreign sensation, the finger withdrew, and two replaced it, stretching, filling. She bit her lip and groaned, tucking her face into Billy's shoulder.

"Kiss me, Jessie," he said.

She pressed her mouth against his and his tongue swept inside. She sucked it in like a butterscotch candy and cradled his face between her hands. He tugged on her hips, rocking her forward and back. She concentrated on his movements and the flickers that spread through her body and the heat and fire that spread through her limbs.

Raines swiped her flesh with more cream, coating her ass and the small entrance he planned to plunder. He nudged the small hole gently with his cock. She fought the instinct to clench against him and instead latched again onto Billy's lips and ground her pussy against him, searching for the tiny spot she knew existed, the place that would shatter her world.

Raines penetrated her slowly, following her cues, allowing her time to adjust to the invasion. His cock was too big. She feared it would split her apart, but when she tensed, Billy gently bit her lip and ground his groin against her clit, and her resistance faded. Raines' hands clenched on her hips, pulling her slowly back toward him. As the pressure intensified, Jessie closed her mind to thought and surrendered to the fire and the pleasure.

Knowing these men cared for her and wanted to share her pleasure stole her fear and the last of her anxiety. She pushed back against Raines, carefully and slowly. He groaned, and his hair swept over her back. His forehead dropped against her and rubbed back and forth.

"It feels incredible," she whispered.

He pressed a kiss on her skin then the heat of him vanished. He began to move gently, gliding within her at a slow but steady pace. Each rock of his body forced her pussy to slide on Billy's cock. She felt the tension in each man, their need for restraint, their concentration as they controlled the rhythm against the tide of sensations flooding through them. Their concern for her made her brave. She lifted slightly and took control, gently rocking back and forth on both cocks. Her pussy tugged on Billy's cock. The muscles in her ass clenched and tightened around Raines'. Both men groaned simultaneously and a tremulous laugh escaped from Billy.

"I told you she could handle it, Cutter. She's a natural."

Jessie ground her clit against Billy's body as his cock head pressed the magic button inside her pussy. An explosion of sensation poured through her body. She bit her lip as her orgasm swelled and rolled through her like a storm surge, then churned and crashed over her with the strength of a tidal wave. Her back arched in passion. In ecstasy, she forced her hips down on Raines, driving his cock into her ass until she could feel his balls smack against her. Her whole body shook, her limbs quivering as her hips bucked forward, then back. Every muscle in her body tightened, clenched and finally throbbed as she fell bonelessly against Billy's chest, laughing like an idiot.

The men didn't laugh. They came suddenly, both growling guttural moans that ripped through her. She had thought Raines' cock would split her apart earlier, but as both cocks swelled with passion, the pain and pleasure threatened to split her mind as well. Billy's mouth grabbed at hers. Her pussy filled with Billy's cream as he pulsed within her. In another moment, Raines exploded within her. Each jet of fluid made her ass spasm with him, and a trickle of moisture leaked down the soft flesh. His head dropped to her back. The sweat from his brow smeared across her skin.

Slowly he withdrew. She immediately felt empty and lonely. She lay quietly for a moment on Billy's damp chest, listening to the

hammering of his heart. Raines ran a hand down her back then caressed her ass. She giggled as she rolled off Billy and threw herself down on the blanket, throwing her arms up.

"I think my ass is numb again," she said.

Billy swiveled toward her. "I'd imagine your entire body is numb."

"Pretty close to it."

Raines leaned down and kissed her then tugged her to her feet.

"Get your lazy ass up. We're all going for a swim."

She leapt to her feet and smacked his ass. He turned to her with a ferocious growl, and she took off running. She heard Billy following, muttering, "They're worse than children."

Chapter 14

When they pulled into the overgrown lane leading to her farm, the first thing Jessie noticed was a rhythmic thump, some kind of banging. She climbed to her knees and stared through the trees, trying to figure out what the noise could be. When they cleared the tunnel of greenery, she fell back in the wagon, overwhelmed by the sight that greeted her.

Rob and two other men hammered steadily on a framework that lay stretched across the clearing. Three other frames, already completed, had formed three-quarters of a barn structure. Caleb and his slender friend worked on boards laid across sawhorses while Martin measured each board then added it to a growing pile. Allen Sikes, leaning against a makeshift cane, hobbled between the groups, apparently supervising their work. Thomas lay beneath the shade of a tree, watching his friends work with a wistful smile. Richard Morris was shackled to the water pump, looking gloomier than usual. He'd never been a very happy man, but he would be far less happy after she killed him, Jessie thought.

"Now there's a sight," Raines said.

"Morris?" Jessie said. "You're right. In another few minutes he won't be breathing."

"Don't ruin their surprise, Jessie," Billy said. "We'll handle Morris later. He's not going anywhere."

When the wagon clattered into view, all heads lifted and smiles spread across the men's faces. Rob and Martin stopped working. Martin ran to greet them and Rob followed behind.

Jessie jumped from the wagon as Martin reached her. She wrapped him in her arms. She couldn't take her eyes off the structure.

"Do you like it?" Martin asked.

"It's wonderful," Jessie said. "How did you all manage to do this?"

Rob tipped his hat back and glanced over his shoulder. "It was Sikes' idea. Seems the man knows his way around building. Said he owed you. He's doing a good job, and a course he has a good crew." Rob nodded toward Caleb and the other men. "I think they'd do anything for you, Jessie."

"That's 'cause they're her people," Billy said with a wink.

"She needs to get inside," Raines said. "The squirt too."

"I want to help," Jessie said. "They've gone to all this trouble and—"

Raines held up the rope. "You can do it the easy way or the hard way."

Jessie stomped her foot in the grass. "That's not fair. I want to help."

Raines climbed down and began to unload the wagon. "And when Prentice's man arrives and sees you free as a lark? When he sees Martin isn't lost at all? Are you going to be the one to explain that?"

"Oh, right," Jessie said. "I'm a hostage. Well, I'll take the easy way then."

She took Martin's hand and practically skipped away. Her heart was so incredibly light she thought it might float right out of her chest.

* * * *

Jessie had tried everything to make the time pass faster. She'd prepared a pie and had one of the women put it in the oven in the outdoor kitchen. Like everything else she'd attempted to cook, it sat on the counter like an unappetizing hunk. Even Martin wouldn't touch

it. She'd scrubbed the floor with a vengeance then immediately worn dirty tracks across the boards with her pacing. She'd even tried to read Raines' book, a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she'd heard of but had never been able to find in Maysville. As much as she loved the story, she couldn't concentrate. She slammed it down on the table and resumed her pacing.

"We don't have enough wood to build the barn *and* replace the floors in here," Martin said. "Can't you sit down for a minute?"

"I've been sitting for hours."

Martin rolled his eyes. "You haven't been sitting. And it's only been two hours and," he glanced across the room at the clock, "twenty minutes."

She wanted to go outside, but she knew the men would just carry her back in. She'd watched Raines and Billy escort Morris back to the stable then join the other men in working on the barn. The other side was up now, and she stared with amazement at the structure, which was considerably smaller than the first barn but promised to be a much more sound building. Sikes seemed to know what he was doing.

When next she peeked—possibly for the hundredth time—she brushed back the curtain irritably to see Billy hustling everyone to the stable. She cocked her head, trying to hear anything, and barely made out the clatter of wheels. Within moments, a wagon appeared. It lurched over her pot-holed lane and circled the dooryard before stopping.

"They're here," she whispered.

Martin ran to the window and they peeked out together. A surly-looking man climbed down and waited for Raines. They spoke for a few minutes, then Raines held out his hand and one by one her people climbed down—two men and two women, one of them Glory.

Rob tossed down his hammer and ran to the wagon. Glory took several cautious steps then started running as well. When Rob swept her up and gave her a hearty kiss, Jessie jumped up and down, clapping. She started toward the door, but Martin grabbed her arm, shaking his head.

Jessie took a deep breath. "You're right. Not much longer now. Notice anything different about me?" She tilted her head.

He glanced down her dress. He peered at her hair. His gaze finally locked on the hands she held loosely at her sides.

His mouth dropped. "You look relaxed."

She gave him a bright smile. "I'm learning self-control."

"I'm proud of you. And it's going to save wear and tear on your stuff." He looked out the curtain again. "Looks like Rob and I have some more work to do. Hope Cutter still has that list for filing. Gonna have to add some more to it. And think up some more witness names. I wonder if "

He continued babbling as she sat back down at the table. She smiled and opened *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, humming as she read.

* * * *

"Ouch!" Jessie whispered. "I just twisted my ankle in some kind of gopher hole. I used to run all over this land."

She stared into the darkness of the Travers property as they made their way to Ellie's barn.

"But not in the dark," Martin said. "Plus you're an old lady now." He chuckled softly and tore off after Billy.

"I'm not old," she muttered. "And a light would be nice."

"Can't afford a light," Raines said. "Your stepmother seems the suspicious type."

"Suspicious isn't the word for Ellie. Demented is closer."

"Well, Doctor McGee," Raines said, "we'll have to introduce you to Doc Winters one day. He'd tell you dementia is a totally different sort of disorder."

"You've mentioned Doc Winters before. Did you work with him at Massachusetts General?"

He remained quiet as they trudged a few more yards through the field toward the barn. She didn't think he would answer. Finally his soft voice wrapped around her.

"Doc Winters talked with me after I came back from Shiloh."

"Oh," she said quietly. "And what did he say?"

"Melancholia. Depressed spirit. Unwilling and unable to enjoy things. I didn't need him to tell me that. I was living it. I'd already spent a month trying to get myself killed by anyone with an attitude bigger than my own. Even that didn't work. Turns out I'm better at fighting than I thought. Or I have a need to live with the guilt."

"You have to learn to let go of that. Cutter, you did the absolute best you could. I'm sure there are many grateful families out there. You couldn't save everyone. This is a war. People pay the consequences."

He sighed. "I'm coming to realize that."

She touched his arm, and he paused, turning to her. "How do you feel now?"

"A little different."

"In what way?"

His hands enveloped her shoulders in the darkness. His breath washed across her face. "I've learned that a life worth living is filled with risks. I've also learned that having liabilities makes us human. And liabilities—like Billy, Martin, Jane, Rob, you—make life worth living."

"I've always believed that," Jessie said.

"I know," he said quietly. "You're the one who taught me."

* * * *

"Okay, Galahad, we're counting on you," Billy said.

"I know what to do. Squeeze through, find Jane and start untying her." Martin turned to Billy and gripped his shirt. "What if Ellie put chains on her?"

"If there are chains, come back and tell us. You just get in and see what the situation is. We'll be making the hole larger while you're inside."

Martin dropped to the ground, stuck his shoulders into the opening and wiggled his skinny little body through. Immediately Billy loped to the corner of the barn to keep a lookout on the house. Raines stepped forward with the saw and slowly and methodically began to file at the boards.

"You've done this before, Cutter," Jessie said.

"A jail break?" he asked. "Sure. Had to break Billy out once. You know how he is. Always in some kind of trouble."

"No, silly, it was a joke. I meant the sawing."

He laughed softly. "Usually have to take a little more care than this. But I don't think anyone will be judging my work."

Gradually the hole widened to accommodate a grown woman—possibly a very pregnant woman. Jessie had no way of knowing just how pregnant Jane actually was. Martin had no idea, said he just thought Jane was getting fatter and he hadn't cared about that.

Jessie hunkered on the ground, peering into the dark hole. She ignored the sawdust drifting around her and counted off each swipe of the saw, trying to keep her nerves under control. She heard cautious movement within as Martin shuffled across the floor and an occasional "oomph" as he met an obstacle. Finally Martin's desperate whisper broke the silence. "Jane?"

Jessie held her breath, afraid to make a sound.

Jane's stunned voice drifted through the passage. "Marty? What are you doing here?"

Jessie dropped her face in her hands and nearly sobbed with relief. Tears rose in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. "Oh, God, Cutter, she's there."

"You doubted me?"

"No, not at all, but I can hear her."

"We'll have her out pretty quick, as long as Marty can figure it out in the dark."

He removed several pieces of wood and laid them quietly in the grass. He continued to saw and finally Martin's head poked through the opening.

"I've got her," he whispered. "Two ropes. Nothing to it. You know Ellie. She does everything half-assed."

He disappeared from view, and suddenly Jane's face appeared. Jessie cradled it for a minute then reached inside. Jane crawled rather awkwardly through the hole. Jessie grabbed her arms and helped her to stand. She enveloped her in a hug that made Jane grunt. Jessie couldn't seem to get close enough. When she drew back, she ran her hand down Jane's growing belly, and the other woman chuckled softly.

"A bit bigger than I used to be," she murmured quietly.

"Not too much yet," Jessie said. "You feel perfect. More than perfect."

She moved closer and laid her head against Jane's breast. The quiet thump of her heart beat gently inside and made Jessie feel calm and whole again. She felt like she'd finally made it home. Jane ran a gentle hand down the back of Jessie's hair, stroking as she had when Jessie was a young girl.

"Oh, Jessie, I've missed you, honey. Are you okay?"

"I am now," Jessie said and burst into tears.

* * * *

Martin and Jane walked arm in arm through the dark meadow, Raines in the lead. Billy hung back for a moment and leaned very close to Jessie, whispering in her ear.

"She's very special, isn't she?"

Jessie pulled back for a moment, seemingly surprised by his words. He glanced at the dark shadows ahead of them. He heard a soft

musical laugh and saw Jane's shadow hand reach out to ruffle Martin's hair. Martin's shadow leaned closer to hers.

"She's the most special woman I've ever known," Jessie said.

"What do you think makes her that way?" Billy asked.

Jessie seemed to think for a moment, pausing in the grass. "I don't know. I just know that I'm happy when I'm with her. She brings out the color in my world. She makes everything right."

Billy wrapped his hand around the quartz in his pocket, thinking of amber, chestnut and cinnamon. He understood exactly what Jessie meant. Clarissa had once brought out the color in his world and he was so grateful to her for showing him what love could mean, but he thought it might be time to let Clarissa go. The quartz dropped into his pocket.

As Jessie picked up her skirt and skipped off—yelping when she stumbled in another gopher hole—he chuckled in the darkness.

The colors of his world had started to shine again but they'd taken on a greenish hue.

* * * *

They clustered around the bonfire, enjoying the last of their meal and basking in Jane's presence. Rob eventually brought out his fiddle and soon the dooryard filled with the sounds of happy tunes, the clapping of hands and the stomping of feet as everyone enjoyed the music.

Billy clasped Jessie's hand and led her away from the group. Raines followed. When they were out of the circle of light cast by the fire, Billy turned to them.

"I don't think it's going to be safe for Jane here," Billy said.

Jessie's eyes widened. "I just got her back in my life. I don't want to give her up."

"Prentice isn't a stupid man," Raines said. "When he discovers her missing, he's going to figure it out. He's going to know what part

we played and what part you played. You might be reasonably safe by virtue of your position in this county. A young widow going missing or turning up dead might cause questions, especially after Jacob."

Jessie shook her head. "He planned to abduct me before. What difference will it make now?"

"He knows Ellie knows," Billy said. "He won't risk it again, and he certainly can't risk the entire family disappearing now. But if *Jane* disappears, it won't cause him those kinds of problems. He might use her to get to you."

"He wouldn't dare do that, would he?" Jessie asked.

"He dared to hire Morris to kill your father," Billy said. "I don't think the man has a conscience."

Jessie started to pace. "Aren't we going to turn him in? I thought you were going to talk to your friend Sheffield."

Billy spun her around. "Of course we are. But Sheffield's in Cincinnati, so one of us has to get there."

"I'll go," Raines said. "I can—"

Billy shook his head and looked toward the fire. "No, they need you here until we get this settled. You're better at the protection stuff than I am. Not going to be able to act my way out of a gunfight, Cutter. That's your area. I can help them all to safety and take Jane with me temporarily to Cincinnati. I can report to Sheffield, and we can come back once we know Prentice has been handled."

Jessie pursed her lips and studied Billy. "You are coming back, right?"

"How can you doubt that?" He shuffled his feet under her scrutiny and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Jessie McGee, I can't imagine my life without you in it."

She tucked her hands around the back of his neck and drew his face down to her. Her lips pressed against his mouth. "Good because I'm not willing to give you up for more than..." She whirled around and met Raines' eyes. "How long will all this take?"

He scratched at his jaw. "Couple of weeks maybe. Guess it depends on how fast Billy can get his ass down the Ohio."

She put her hands on her hips and sighed. She knew she was pouting, but she couldn't help it. She'd just gotten her friend back only to lose her again. And she really didn't like the idea of losing Billy too, no matter what the time frame. "You can't do better than that? Who put you in charge of this mission anyway? I still wish none of this was necessary. Can't we come up with a Plan B?"

Raines put his arm around her shoulders and tugged. She spilled against him and took the comfort he seemed willing to give. "I can't think of a Plan B right now, but I'll give it some more thought."

Jessie reached out and took Billy's hand. "So you're leaving us? Tomorrow?"

"Seems the wisest thing to do. Someone is going to show up here soon. We've got to get these people to safety."

"And Prentice isn't going to wait long," Raines said. "He'll discover her missing by tomorrow."

Jessie sighed. "So this is my last night with both of you for a while." She glanced behind them into the darkness. "Maybe we should take advantage of it."

"The mission's over now," Raines said. "We got her back. The bargain's ended."

Jessie smiled. "I don't care about the bargain anymore. I'm not sure I ever did."

She moved out of the circle of Raines' arms and reached for their hands. She began to tug the men slowly toward the gloom.

* * * *

She led them into a stand of trees. She found a soft nest of pine cones and leaves and went to work unbuttoning their pants. She tugged each pair down over their legs, until they stood at her mercy

with the cloth around their feet. She dropped to her knees in front of them.

"This time I'm giving back. Just giving."

She reached out and slid her hands down their cocks. The warmth of their skin, the strength of their flesh overwhelmed her. They cast each other an embarrassed glance, then Raines turned his face to stare over her into the woods. Billy kept his eyes locked on hers so she started with him.

She covered the head of his cock with her lips, sucking gently as her fingers continued to stroke his shaft. She dipped down and licked his balls, listening as his breath caught in his chest. The whole time she tugged at Raines' cock with her other hand. He gritted his teeth and continued to stare straight ahead, but his hand touched the top of her head and his fingers caressed her hair gently. She sucked on Billy until she felt his thigh tense under her hand.

She took his cock in her hand then twisted her face toward Raines, her mouth surging forward to swallow his cock in a huge gulp. He jerked, his entire body going rigid. She laughed in her throat.

Not so tough now, eh, Mr. Raines?

Billy moaned softly as she stroked his cock. She thought both were very close to coming. She sucked Raines deep into her mouth until his head bumped the back of her throat. She resisted the impulse to gag, and she flicked her tongue along the underside of his cock while she stared into his eyes. When it looked like Raines would faint, she turned back to Billy.

She clasped Billy's ass and tugged him closer. His cock slid between her lips and plunged into her mouth. He pressed her head and thrust with long, fast strokes into her throat. She focused only on giving Billy pleasure. Her hand almost slipped from Raines' cock before Raines curled his fingers around hers to continue stroking into her cupped palm. Billy's head swelled in her mouth. His cock opened up and jet after jet of sticky fluid shot down her throat. His pleasure seemed to connect directly to her pussy, and she had to exercise her

newfound self-control to keep from touching herself. Billy held onto her head for balance as she slowly milked his cock dry and let it slip from her mouth before leaning in and licking the fluid that had leaked from her mouth to his balls.

When he drooped forward, she released him and he sank to his knees.

"Fuck, Jessie."

She gave him a quick smile then turned to Raines. Overwhelmed by what he had just witnessed, Raines surged toward her. Jessie opened her mouth in a wide smile and swallowed his cock whole. His entire hard length slid deep into her throat until his balls pressed against her chin. Jessie was surprised at how much she enjoyed the feel of his cock buried in her mouth. She sucked on him for her own pleasure as much as his. It was warm and comforting. But Raines had no time for subtlety. He placed his hand on the back of her neck, caressing where he often kissed her then pumped urgently into her mouth. She grabbed his ass and pulled him into her mouth, matching his urgency.

His balls tightened as they slapped her chin. His head swelled, and she tasted his precum. She prepared to swallow a river of his fluid, and he didn't let her down. Raines threw his head back and arched his back as he shouted his pleasure. Hot streams of fluid sprayed the back of her throat, filled her mouth, and slid down. She held on to Raines to keep him steady and continued to suck on his cock while he spasmed. Jessie kept her mouth locked on his cock while he lowered himself to the ground.

She'd never felt so powerful, so confident, so perfectly accepted and content.

She released his cock, kissed her way up his chest until he hauled her up and kissed her the way she had always wanted to be kissed, his tongue sweeping through every inch of her mouth. His heart pounded against her breast. When he finally pulled away, he turned to Billy with a smile.

"Now that was fun."

Billy shook his head. "Fuck, Cutter, it took you long enough."

She wrapped her arms around their necks, tugging them both against her. A kiss landed on each of her cheeks and she smiled.

* * * *

"Where's Martin?"

Jessie's gaze circled the group, her glance flickering over each person.

"He went lookin' for you quite a while ago," Rob said.

Jane rose. "You were talking earlier." She pointed to where she'd been standing with Billy and Raines discussing Prentice. "Over there. I saw him walk toward you."

"But he didn't—" All the contentment she'd felt shattered. "Oh God, he heard us."

Jessie lifted her skirts and ran full speed to the stable. She careened around the corner and burst through the door. Morris bolted upright, but she ignored him. Raines' and Billy's horses whinnied softly. Butterscotch was gone. She whirled around and faced the man chained to the anvil.

"What did he say to you?"

Morris's lips pressed in a tight line. He leaned back against the anvil and glared at her.

"I'm not going to ask again!" Jessie raised her knee and stomped down on Morris's injured thigh. He shrieked and shrank back against the anvil, gulping in air.

"Little bastard called me a murderer." He took another deep breath, pressing his hand to his thigh and clenching his teeth. "Got on that sorry excuse for a horse."

Raines and Billy threw themselves through the open door.

"Where was he going?" Jessie growled. She took a step forward and lifted her foot theateningly.

Morris squeezed his leg. He glanced up at the two men. "Keep her away from me."

"Not fucking likely," Billy said. "Better answer the question."

"He wanted to know where Prentice was," Morris muttered.

"Did you tell him?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Don't know where he is. He moves around."

Jessie clenched her hands. "So where's he going?"

Raines moved toward the saddles. "Better make it fast. She's losing patience with you. And she has less than I do."

Morris' head thunked back against the anvil. "He's going to Ellie's."

* * * *

Raines shoved his rifle in the carrier. "We can travel faster without you. We only have two horses."

"He took my pistol, Cutter!"

"I know, Jessie. Was it loaded?"

She raked her hands through her hair. "I don't know. I can't remember. I—"

"Don't worry. We'll find him. Butterscotch isn't exactly the fastest horse I've ever seen. Martin's probably still on the road."

Behind him, Billy swung into the saddle and steered his horse in the direction of the road. They'd already lost valuable time. He glanced impatiently toward the front of the property.

Jessie lifted her chin, tears sparkling in her eyes. "You don't know Butterscotch like I do. She's got a lot of heart. She'll do whatever he wants. She can *gallop*."

Raines took her face in his hands. "Do you want me to stand here and listen while you defend a horse?"

"No." Her voice broke. "I want you to find my brother."

"We will."

Caleb's deep voice drifted into the light of the fire. "Anything we can do, Doctor Raines?"

Raines' glance flickered over the people huddled behind the big man. Each one wore a worried expression, fear etched on their faces. They'd all come to like Martin Travers.

"Appreciate it, Caleb. Maybe you could keep an eye on the place while we're gone."

"Can do," Caleb said. He spread his arms out as though to envelop the entire group. He quietly herded them back to the house.

Raines leaned down and brushed a kiss across Jessie's mouth. "Go with Jane." He turned her around and watched as Jane's arms encircled Jessie, who leaned against her.

"Don't let Prentice hurt him, Cutter. Please."

"No, Jessie. Never."

He lifted himself onto the horse, digging in his heels. He and Billy bolted down the rutted lane to find the boy.

* * * *

They traveled at a brisk gallop for about twenty minutes, risking their necks in the dark on the rutted road. Raines didn't value his neck much at the moment. It seemed his entire life, his future might hinge on finding the kid and keeping him safe. If he went back to Jessie without Martin or, worse, with what was left of him, everything would be over. He'd never be able to look at her again. He hadn't allowed himself to think about how much Jessie might mean to him, how much Martin might mean to him. But suddenly it seemed pretty clear in his mind.

He meant to do his damndest to keep Jessie McGee in their lives. And the squirt was part of the deal. Who was he kidding? He'd come to love Martin Travers and it was obvious how Billy felt about him. After his father's miserable example, Raines didn't know how to be a father, but he wanted to try. He hoped like hell Mr. Marlowe had been a good father and Billy knew what to do.

He thought they might be pretty close to Ellie's now. He cursed the darkness, hoping they didn't overshoot their target.

He heard nothing but the pounding of hooves and his own rapid heartbeat hammering in his ears. Suddenly he sensed he rode alone. Raines continued down the road for a moment and finally glanced over his shoulder to see the shadow of Billy's horse pawing the air. He jerked on his own reins and his horse skidded to a halt, circling nervously. He kicked his heels into its flanks and bolted back to Billy.

"I hear something," Billy said.

"There's something unnatural about your hearing," Raines said, shaking his head.

"You're close to deaf, Cutter."

"What do you hear?"

"Another horse, I think. Shh."

Their horses circled impatiently and the sounds of their hooves dancing on the rocks irritated him. He strained to hear anything, trying to curb his own breath.

Another dark shadow burst into view. Both horses whinnied with anxiety, and Raines shouted to the rider. The horse came to an abrupt stop, sliding in the soft dirt.

A woman's voice broke the darkness and Raines finally took a breath.

"Thank God! Help me!"

Raines jumped from his mount, trying to discern anything in the darkness. He heard the sound of labored breathing over the noisy snorts of the horses. The woman was crying as well, trying to find words. As he neared he recognized Butterscotch and saw the glimmer of golden hair. Ellie Travers. She had a bundle spread over her lap.

"Help me," she gasped. "It's Martin."

Raines gently touched the still form then pulled him down and into his arms.

Ellie pulled in a huge gulp of air. "He's been shot."

Raines peered down at the still face. Even in the darkness, with most of the moonlight sheltered behind clouds, he saw how pale the boy looked. He leaned his ear against Martin's chest, feeling the sticky ooze of blood beneath his cheek. Martin's shirt was slick with blood, saturated. He put that out of his head. His own breath sounded so loud and the pulse in his ears thrummed violently, a pounding that filled his head to bursting. He couldn't hear anything.

Ellie moaned softly behind them, keening over and over, "She's going to kill me. She's going to kill me. Tell her it wasn't my fault."

"Goddamn it, Ellie, shut the hell up. Billy!"

Billy jumped from his horse and was at Raines' side in an instant.

"I can't hear his heartbeat. His breath."

He felt something wind through him, some totally foreign sensation that threatened to swamp and drown him.

Billy laid his ear against Martin's chest and swallowed hard. "He's bleeding, Cutter," he murmured. "A lot."

"I know." The sound of his voice didn't sound familiar. It seemed like someone else. The feeling suddenly coalesced. Panic. Fear.

"But his heart is beating," Billy said softly. "I can hear it." "Strong? Steady?"

Billy held his breath, listening intently. "Strong, no. Steady, yes, but slow." Billy pushed his ear against Martin's nose and mouth. "Slight breaths. Kind of wheezy."

"Get on your horse. I'm going to hand him up to you."

Billy moaned. "Oh, Cutter. I'm scared. What if I hurt him?"

"You can't hurt him more than he's already hurt. We've got to get him back to Jessie's, to my kit. I need to ride ahead to get things ready. Go fast, but as steady as you can. If you have to sacrifice a little speed, do it."

Raines dropped a kiss on Martin's forehead. The boy stirred, groaning. Billy mounted and Raines lifted the damaged bundle up to lay across his friend's lap, wondering how Ellie had managed to do it

on her own. No time for that, but he gave her a bit of credit, even if she'd done it to save her own skin. He gave Billy a hard look nodded. Billy took off. Raines mounted his own horse and flashed by them, heading for a destination he feared to reach.

Chapter 15

They rushed out to meet him. Raines jumped from the horse and ran the gauntlet of their ambush, brushing past everyone including Jessie. He ignored the questions they hurled at him like bullets and flew into the house. Standing in the center of the room, he frantically tried to remember where Jessie had stowed his medical kit. He yanked open cupboards, tossed laundry and shoved everything in his path.

"Damn it. Where is it?" He whirled around, trying to see in all places at once.

"Cutter! What happened?" Jessie ran through the door moments behind him, clutching her skirt, skidding on the floorboards. She stood in the open doorway, her confused gaze roaming over the destruction. "This looks too familiar."

He ignored her and kicked open the bedroom door, surveying the dark interior, patting the top of the dresser.

She followed on his heels, firing more questions at him. "Why are you back? Did you find him? Where's Billy?" She suddenly came to a stop. "What are you looking for?"

"My Goddamn kit!"

She flew to the sideboard and slid open the drawer. When she pivoted, he yanked the kit out of her hands and slammed it onto a bench, lifting the catches. His hands shook violently. He squeezed them into fists and finally turned to meet Jessie's horrified stare.

"Martin's been hurt. Billy's bringing him. He's right behind me." The blood drained from her face, and her mouth fell open with a strangled gasp. He gripped her arm and shook her when a glazed look settled in her eyes. "Don't. I'm going to need you."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, they were clear, focused. Her voice held a tremor when she asked, "How bad?"

"Shot. In the chest. There's a lot of blood." He turned his attention to Caleb, Rob and Jane, who hovered in the open doorway. "Find me towels, candles, water. Lots of water."

Jane began searching the cupboards, grabbing candles and jamming them into candlesticks. Caleb grabbed the buckets, and he and Rob bolted out the door.

He glanced around the room, assessing the area and finally strode across the room. He swept his arm across the top of a small worktable, scattering the contents onto the floor in a clatter of metal and glass. Jessie twitched at the sudden noise, then latched onto an edge and helped drag it across the room closer to the dining table. He seized a pitcher of water, dumping the contents onto both tabletops. He shoved a bar of soap into her hands.

"Scrub. Thoroughly." He stared into her eyes. "Not one of your half-assed cleaning jobs, okay?"

She nodded her head violently and started to scrub the small surface. Suddenly Jane was beside her with a large pile of towels.

"Oh, God, Jane," Jessie murmured. "What am I going to do?"

Jane's glance flickered to him. "We're going to keep him alive," she said firmly. "Aren't we, Mr. Raines?"

He nodded, but when he tried to swallow his throat seemed locked.

Jessie glanced over her shoulder, her arms never slowing. "You've done this before, right, Cutter? Lots of bullets at Shiloh, lots of wounds." She dropped her head, and her entire body shuddered. "Please tell me it's going to be okay."

He went around the table and turned her to face him. Her wet arms clutched his waist as her face burrowed into his chest. He ran a hand down her back then pressed his lips against her hair. "Yes, it's

going to be okay. Now finish the cleaning for me, honey. They'll be here in a minute."

She continued to scrub with Jane's help, rinsing and drying both tables. They spread a clean sheet over the larger surface.

"I don't want him lying on that hard wood," Jessie murmured.

Raines scrubbed his hands and rinsed them thoroughly. He grabbed a cloth to dry them as Rob came through the door, carrying buckets of water. Caleb followed, carrying a motionless bundle soaked in crimson.

"Billy's..." He laid Martin down gently on the table, cradling his head as he lowered it. "Billy's a might tore up."

"Oh, God," Jessie said.

Jane smoothed Martin's lank, sweaty hair back from his forehead and dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Be strong, little one." She glanced at the door. "I'll go see to Billy."

Jessie stared into her brother's face, her hands cradling his head. Her fingers swept across his cheek. She glanced up when a shadow drifted across the table and Raines followed her gaze. Ellie Travers stood in the open doorway, pale, shaking, her dress smeared with Martin's blood. It was the last thing he needed but the night seemed filled with things he didn't need.

Jessie gaped at Ellie. "What are you doing here?"

Raines cut Martin's shirt, stripping away the soaked cloth. "She was bringing him here. We ran into her on the road. A redemption of sorts I imagine. Now's not the time, Jessie."

Jessie ran the sleeve of her dress across her forehead. "No, of course not."

"I care about him, more than anyone," Ellie murmured. She swept her finger down Martin's arm. "I never wanted anything to happen to him. I'm truly sorry."

Raines dropped the scissors into the kit. "Tell us what happened, Ellie."

She took a deep breath, her glance flickering over Martin's still form. "Prentice came to get Jane, but she was gone. He was very angry with me, and I wasn't too happy with him. We argued." Tears slid down her cheeks. "He's such a good boy. Always was. I was just so damn *jealous*." A sob tore from her chest.

"It's okay. We understand that. Then what?" Raines asked. He touched the chest wound gently and blood seeped over his finger and pooled in the wound. It was so close to his heart. "Fuck." His hands shook again, and he clenched them, smearing blood over his palms.

Ellie pulled in a huge gulp of air. "Martin burst in. He said he'd come to find out where Prentice lived but," her breathing hitched again, "this must be his lucky day because ..."

She laughed, but the sound had a hysterical edge. Jessie moaned and dropped her forehead against Martin's.

"Then Martin pulled out a pistol. I think it was that one—"

"Prentice had a gun too?" Raines asked.

"No, well, I don't know. Everything happened so fast. He jumped Martin, and," she swallowed hard, "a gun went off."

"I remember now I never loaded Pa's gun," Jessie murmured. "And I never told Marty where the cartridges were. You know how boys are. I hid them with my underthings. Figured he'd never look there."

"Oh God. He shot a little boy." Ellie slumped against the wall. "When Martin fell, Prentice ran. There was so much blood. I didn't know what to do, but I knew I had to get him to Jessie."

Raines didn't like the bleeding. Not at all. For one moment his gaze riveted on the doorway. "Do you think he'll come here?"

Distracted, Ellie shook her head. "What? Oh, Prentice? No, he can't stay here now. There's nowhere to hide. I think he'll head to New Orleans. You can't shoot *children*." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Okay, Ellie. Go outside for now. You did good." He nodded toward Caleb. "Going to need your help again, Caleb. Hold his legs. Just to be safe. I need him to be very still."

Caleb took a stance at the end of the table while Raines put his kit on the smaller table. He glanced up to see Jessie scrubbing her hands. He reached into the kit, and his entire body shuddered. He ran his hands down his pants, trying to calm down. He peered at his palms stupidly. Smeared blood. Streaks of dirt. "Fuck."

He grabbed the soap from Jessie and washed his hands again. She reached into his kit and pulled out the chloroform bottle. She laid a small piece of cloth over Martin's nose and carefully poured two drops. Martin bucked for a minute, but Caleb held him tight. Jessie's lips tightened as she tried to ignore her flailing brother. She reached into the kit, pulling out a small scalpel. When Raines came back to the table, he reached toward it, but glanced up, suddenly confused.

She gave him a tremulous smile. "A small incision, right? To see the bullet better?"

He nodded, trying to ignore the pain that settled over his temple. "Right." He reached again and stared at his hand, but he didn't need to look at it to know what had happened. His hand shook like it had been plunged into icy water. The tremor ran up his arm and scared the piss out of him.

"Cutter?"

His head shot up. Jessie stared at him, worry etched on her brow. She waved the scalpel in her hand. He tried again. His finger touched the metal handle and curled away. A drop of sweat ran down the side of his face.

"My hands are shaking," he murmured.

Jessie wrapped her hand around his. "Control it. Make it stop."

"I can't." He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, willing the tremors to stop.

"Goddamn it, Raines! Save my brother!"

His eyes snapped open. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but her face hardened, her eyes blazing into his as though daring him to refuse. She clenched her jaw and stared at him. He reached out and forced his hand to take the scalpel from her. He leaned over Martin, unsure, afraid for perhaps the first time in his life. He'd saved hundreds of lives. Lost hundreds, too. But this life seemed different. He looked at her again, and she nodded firmly at him to begin.

He started with a small incision, cutting a slice in the skin around the wound. When blood seeped out, Jessie poured some water over the wound.

"I need the probe," he said. "Long stiff wire, porcelain tip."

She plucked out the instrument and held it out. He carefully laid down the scalpel and flexed his fingers. When he reached for it, his hands steadied slightly but a glimpse at Martin's face sent the tremors racing through once again.

"What's that for?" Jessie asked.

Her voice startled him. He focused his attention on the wound. "It helps me find the bullet. They're hard, like bone. Can't tell with just touch." He inserted the rod into Martin's chest. Martin's eyelids fluttered helplessly. "If it comes away clean, I've hit bone, but bullets are made of lead. They leave a mark. If it comes away with a mark, I've hit the bullet."

He gently moved the probe, prodding the wound for hard surfaces. One area seemed to give slightly, so he pressed it harder. When he removed the probe, a gray sooty stain marked the end of it. "Found it. Forceps. Small curved blades."

Jessie lifted them out immediately, took a deep breath and offered a quick smile.

"Should re-think your life, Jessie. A good surgeon could use you."

He slipped the forceps into the wound until he reached the bullet. Grasping it, he gently tugged and lifted. With the bullet came a glut of blood. Jessie quickly washed it away, but the blood kept coming.

"Back up," he croaked.

Jessie pulled away. He slammed a cloth over the wound, pressing hard. The blood drenched through the cloth immediately, soaking his hand. He pressed his fingers against Martin's throat, but his own pulse throbbed within his fingers and he couldn't tell if Martin had one at all.

"Fuck." He leaned down and pressed his ear to Martin's chest. "Fuck, Martin. Come on! Damn it, I can't hear anything." His body trembled as though caught in an ice storm. Jessie's breath caught in her chest.

Billy's voice settled over him like a warm blanket. "Move away a minute."

Raines stepped backward. Billy leaned down and pressed his ear against the bloody wound. He moved his face to press against Martin's nose. He moved frantically back to his chest.

"Oh, no, you don't, Galahad. I'm not going through this again."

He plunged his fist against Martin's chest, ramming hard. A bone cracked with a sickening sound somewhere in Martin's body. Billy locked his mouth over Martin's. For one terrifying moment, Raines watched as Billy blew air into the still form wondering if his friend had gone crazy. Suddenly Martin's eyes flew open with a choked gasp. Jessie sobbed, the sound catching somewhere in her throat. Billy lurched away, then leaned over again and pressed his cheek against Martin's chest.

"That's my boy," he said softly. He stepped back. "Finish him up. He's not going to do it again. He knows I can't take it." He lowered himself to the floor and dropped his head against his knees.

Raines slammed another towel over the wound, staring at Martin's chest, rising and falling with a soft breath. "Jessie, more chloroform, then the silk."

She lunged toward the kit, fumbling for a minute then gave Martin another drop. Raines removed the cloth and reached for the forceps as she unwound the silk. They worked quickly, Jessie tying the bleeders as he held bits of tissue. Slowly, the blood stopped seeping. Jane appeared like magic and washed the wound as they worked.

"You have blood on your face, Billy," Raines said. "Not going to puke, are you?"

"I'll live," he muttered.

"Didn't know you could perform miracles."

"I'm a man of many talents." He leaned back against the wall and shuddered. His sigh rippled through the room. "Read about it once. Book of Kings. I'm as surprised as you."

"You can give me a surprise like that any time," Jessie murmured. She began to thread more silk through the needle. She held it up. "Do I need two of these?"

Raines glanced up. The lines had vanished from her forehead. Her lips curled up in a soft smile. "One will do. But he's going to have a battle scar."

"I can live with that," Jessie said.

Raines returned her smile. "So can he."

Chapter 16

Jessie finished wrapping the rest of the food bundles and went back outside, loading the wagon for the trip to the river later in the day. The rest of their flock had gathered under the oak tree in the dooryard. They'd enjoyed a picnic while waiting for Billy to return. He'd taken Ellie home and headed into Maysville to turn Morris over to the authorities, carrying witness statements from Ellie and Sikes. When he returned, Rob and Sikes planned to row Jessie's boat several times across the river, carrying the fugitives into the free state of Ohio and safety. Billy would be accompanying them, along with Jane.

Sikes had come to Jessie earlier in the day and apologized for both his sister and himself. He'd asked if he could stay on at the farm. He said between himself and Rob they could have the barn finished in no time, do a few repairs on the property, and Jessie could get back to business as usual. She'd readily accepted since Rob had an admiration for Sikes' work and his change of heart.

Glory had opted to stay, putting her arm around Rob's waist as she told them. She said in no uncertain terms Jessie couldn't cook and Martin would starve without her. The other three from the Travers farm, Phillip, Marcus and Delia, decided to stay as well, explaining that freedom was a good thing and they'd take it, but they loved the family too much to leave them to start a new life. They liked the one they had just fine.

The rest would head north. Billy knew where to take them and get them on their way to new homes. The mysterious Mr. Sheffield seemed to have connections in all areas of Ohio. Thomas had graduated to crutches and he took unsteady steps around the yard, grimacing with each movement. Mary and Thomas's woman Isabel encouraged each step, smiling broadly as he moved around in a small circle. Caleb relaxed, propped against the oak tree. Jessie smiled because his huge bulk had finally stilled. He had closed his eyes and fallen asleep, possibly for the first time in days. Aggie lay cuddled against his chest, dozing also. They seemed to trust that his little brood had found a harbor of safety for the first time in months.

On a blanket, Martin lay against Jane, protected in the circle of her arms. He was still pale and weak, but his wound seemed free of infection. Jessie wasn't worried too much about his recovery. Raines seemed pretty confident he would heal in no time because he was a healthy boy. But Martin wore a look far too serious for the boy she knew. He'd faced death and won, which seemed too grueling a task for a boy of twelve.

When the sounds of horses reached her ears, Jessie watched as all faces turned in the direction of the lane. Billy came into view, leading Raines' horse and Butterscotch. When he saw the group assembled, he spurred his horse and quickly rode to the house, jumped down and headed toward Jessie.

James, Caleb's slender friend, came forward and took the horses' reins, leading them to the stable. Raines came out of the house, carrying his kit to check on his patients.

"How'd it go?" Raines asked.

"Handled," Billy said. "Morris is locked up tight. They sent out bulletins, looking for Prentice. They're determined to find him. I pointed them in the direction of New Orleans. Seems you still can't kill a citizen and shoot a boy in these parts and get away with it no matter how powerful. That's good to know. How're things here?"

"Just about ready," Jessie said. She waved her arm in the direction of the wagon. "Prepared some food bundles and—"

"You gave me some, right?" Billy asked.

"Three jars," Jessie said. "That should get you to Cincinnati."

Billy lunged at her, and she squealed. He buried his face in her neck. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away.

"You're too good to me, Jessie girl."

She pulled away and cupped his face. "That's not possible. I owe you everything." She reached out and snagged Raines' hand, curling her fingers around his. "Both of you."

She glanced at Martin, who whispered something to Jane. Jane nodded, looked at them and smiled. Jane's beautiful serene face held secrets that Jessie couldn't begin to unravel. Jane had always been that way. Raines' voice pulled her out of her thoughts.

"You gave Ellie my offer?"

Billy nodded and patted his pocket. "And she accepted. Got the paper right here. I'll have Sheffield make the arrangements when I see him. Give him the list for filing too. Poor man's going to have a lot of work to do when I get done with him. Should keep him out of trouble for awhile."

Jessie cocked her head. What the hell was Raines up to? He started across the yard, and Jessie clutched his arm.

"What offer?" Jessie asked.

"Raines bought the property from Ellie," Billy said. "Fair price, considering the market and the state of Kentucky right now. Ellie's planning to go to Lexington I think. Something about a sister but—"

"You did what?"

Raines shrugged. "Seemed the right thing to do."

She shoved him in the chest. "You may come from the Boston *Cutters*, and you may have more money than Nathaniel Prentice and God put together, but I won't have you *buying* things for me." She paced around him. "You've never, *we've* never, none of us have ... Oh, you're impossible! We don't have any idea what's going to happen tomorrow, let alone—"

She jerked to a stop and lost all the words in her head when he stepped in front of her. A stain of color whipped across his cheeks.

Maybe she'd finally knocked some sense into his sorry ass. He looked mortified, knowing he'd gone beyond their boundary. She tapped her foot, waiting for his apology then suddenly realized she'd seriously misjudged this situation. Oh, no, it would never be that easy. Cutter Raines would never be embarrassed. His eyes narrowed into dark slits. She scurried back when he took a step toward her. He was pissed.

"What makes you think I did it for you?" he growled. "Though apparently the world and everything in it revolves around you, I do not."

She opened her mouth, and he jabbed a finger at her.

"That would be a mistake. Stop there and listen well. I didn't do it for you." He glared down at her with something that made all the words die in her throat. He stabbed his finger toward Martin. "I did it for *him.*"

"Oh," Jessie squeaked. "That's different then."

"And?" His jaw clenched.

She jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. His arms curled under her ass and cupped her against him. She dropped a kiss on his lips.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"No problem."

She winked at him. "I'll give you a bigger thank you later."

She thought Cutter Raines actually blushed.

* * * *

Jessie tried to keep from pacing as Rob and Sikes prepared the boat, loading half the supplies. Sikes would stay on the other side with the first group until Billy arrived to take charge. She didn't think there'd be any trouble but she could never be sure. This was a very large group. She was glad Raines stood ready in the shadows with his rifle.

"Does everyone have their freedom papers?" Billy asked.

The first group—James, two other men, a woman, a girl and a boy—patted their pockets with brilliant smiles and settled into the boat. They waved their farewells, and Rob and Sikes shoved off and rowed steadily toward the Ohio side of the river.

They watched until the boat made it to the other side, all of them holding their breaths. When Rob began to row back, they all heaved sighs of relief.

From the back of the wagon, Martin whispered something to Jane. She stood. "Caleb? Martin would like to see you."

Martin wiggled slightly, prompting Jessie to rush forward. She got to the wagon as Martin reached into his pocket and held out his fist.

"I want you to have this," he said to Caleb. "Might come in handy in your new life."

Caleb held out his hand, and Martin dropped a gold coin into the man's big palm. He made a gesture to give it back. "Oh, no, Marty, we can't take this."

Jessie cupped his hand and curled his fingers around the coin. "You can."

Caleb swallowed hard, and when he spoke his voice was filled with awe and wonder. "Then we thank you. I've never seen gold like this." He suddenly grinned and turned, rushing toward Thomas. He hunkered down to show the man what lay on his palm. The rest of the group gathered around him.

Raines cocked his head. "You had money? This whole time?"

Her eyes dropped down. "Um, yes." Her gaze fluttered back to his.

Raines looked at her, at Martin, then back to her. "Why—"

"She wouldn't let me give it to you," Martin muttered. "I just did what she said. You know how she is."

"Thought I might need it for something else," Jessie muttered.

Raines tipped back his hat and stared at the sky. Billy grabbed her and flung her backwards, dipping her low over his arm. His mouth swooped down on hers, stealing her breath. He finally released her and spun her in a circle, making her dizzy. She gasped for breath when he clutched her to him and peered into her eyes. Heat rose in her face at the intensity of his gaze.

"You, Jessie McGee, are an endless surprise. A delightful gift. A miracle."

"Billy, I—"

He planted another kiss on her mouth. "Don't say it. We'll hold all that for later, okay?" He winked at her. "Don't let him bully you without me here to handle him." His glance darted toward Raines who rolled his eyes.

He twirled her around again, and her head spun crazily. She stumbled, laughing, when he released her.

"I know I won't be gone long, but I'll miss you, Jessie girl. You're holding a piece of my heart and the colors of my world. You've brought me back to life. With the help of Galahad here."

He turned to Martin, leaned over the wagon and ruffled Martin's hair. "You, my little knight, need to keep things under control here while I'm gone. Between the two of them, they could get into some serious trouble. Can't have Cutter killing people for fun and can't have your big sister running off and making bargains with strange men. Make it your mission. Can you do that?"

Martin made a grumpy sound. "That's a hell of a mission, Billy." A smile skimmed the corner of his lips. "But I think I can handle it. Gonna miss you though. Gonna miss Jane."

Billy reached into his pocket. "We'll be back, Galahad, that's a promise. Probably before Jessie trusts you out of her sight." He took Martin's hand and put the piece of jasper into his cupped fingers. "In the meantime, when you need a little peace and quiet—and you'll probably need plenty with these two around—just hold this and you'll find it."

"I can't keep your rock, Billy," Martin said. "You need it. To remind you of Clarissa, to keep your own peace."

"Not anymore." Jessie loved the smile that spread across his face. "I think I might have found the real thing."

Martin folded his hands around the quartz and clutched it tightly. "I'll keep it for you until I can be with the real thing again." His eyes settled on Jane. "You'll be careful? Really careful?"

She gave him a tender kiss on his forehead. "It's a promise." She patted her rounded belly and gave him a smile. "Got a little brother or sister in here for you. You'll need to teach him the ropes. I'm counting on you."

She climbed from the wagon, and Raines caught her under the arms, gently lowering her to the ground. She turned and wrapped her arms around Jessie. Jane's stomach pressed into Jessie's and for a quick moment a movement flashed between, like the gentle touch of a baby's hand. Jessie laughed and pulled her friend closer.

"Eager to be born, I think," Jane said. "Doesn't quite know what he's getting into with this family."

"Well, it's never dull," Jessie said, glancing at the two men who'd changed her world. "Be safe, Jane. Hurry home to us."

"We'll be back before you know it." She kissed Jessie's cheek and blew a kiss to Martin. She walked to Caleb, waddling slightly. Caleb helped Thomas adjust his crutches, and the three joined Aggie, Isabel and Mary at the riverbank.

Raines came toward them, the rifle angled over his shoulder. "Rob's almost here. Better head down."

Jessie linked her arm through Billy's. "I know it's just for a short time, but I'm going to miss you, Mr. Marlowe."

Billy ducked his head. "It's Reverend Marlowe, actually."

Raines and Jessie stopped simultaneously and swiveled their faces toward him. Raines' jaw dropped, and the rifle slid from his grasp.

"For fuck's sake, Billy. How could you keep a secret like that?" He threw up his arms. "Christ! Don't you think a man needs to know something like that?"

"Hush-hush and all that, Cutter. Kind of lost it all when I left Philadelphia." He glanced at Martin, who gave him a huge smile and a wave. "But for some reason, it seems to be back. Can't imagine why, can you?" He winked.

"No, Billy," Raines said. He bent down, retrieved his rifle and wrapped his arm around Jessie. He dropped a kiss on top of her head. "Can't imagine why at all."

* * * *

It seemed far too quiet. After days spent in the company of hordes, Jessie found herself at loose ends. The evening meal had ended. Rob and Glory had headed back to his cabin and the others, including Sikes, were temporarily bedded down in the stable. She'd safely tucked Martin into her bed. He breathed with ease and slept soundly with the help of a little pain medication.

She wiped the table for the third time and finally tossed down the cloth and headed for the door. Raines sat on the porch steps, gazing into the darkness, listening to the sounds of the night.

"It's too quiet," he said.

Jessie settled beside him. "I know. I can't seem to remember what I used to do at night. Between you and Billy, and fires, and broken legs, and gunshots ..." She shuddered. "Well, I guess I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"Might drop eventually, but I don't think it'll be tonight. Thought maybe tomorrow we could scour your fields and see what medicines we can find. Sound okay to you?"

"Yes, we should do that. I'd love to learn what to use."

Raines rested his elbow on his knee and propped his chin in his hand. "Still think you'd make a great nurse."

Jessie laughed. "I have enough on my plate right now. But you've taught me a lot. I feel like I'm a little more prepared."

"You were right about that horse," he said quietly. "Quite a lot of life left in the old mare. A lot of heart. Great animal. Had her long?"

"Forever. We've grown up together."

"Why'd you name her Butterscotch?"

"Mmm," she said, licking her lips. "Butterscotch was always my favorite candy."

Raines leaned back then dropped a small bundle into her lap. "Figured that out."

She stared for a minute then tore into the strings, opening the package to display a tempting array of butterscotch treats. Her mouth watered.

He glanced at her. "Billy picked them up in Maysville. We thought you deserved them after everything. You've done great here, Jessie."

He studied her as her fingers lingered on each piece. That delightful heat burst into her face and that antsy, nervous feeling flooded through her.

She held one out.

"You don't have to share them if you don't want to."

"I want to."

He opened his mouth, and she dropped the candy between his lips. "Mmm."

She popped one in her mouth. Sheer heaven. She sucked on the candy, relishing the flavor, enjoying all the good memories a simple taste could bring back. Images flickered through her mind—of her mother, her pa, Jane, Martin—and each one caused a tiny pang to flutter in her heart. But each one also made her feel complete, whole and happy.

When the image of Billy flashed through her mind, she smiled.

"How long are you staying when Billy comes back?"

"Haven't really talked about that yet. I suspect he'll come back with some sort of orders, though I can't—"

"I know. Hush-hush."

His hand wrapped around hers. "But we plan to stay as long as we can. And even if we get new orders," he squeezed her hand tight, "we plan to come back. If that's okay with you."

She turned her face toward him.

"Would that be okay with you, Jessie?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. It would be more than okay."

"Good." He stared straight ahead. "Haven't exactly figured out how all this might work yet."

"You don't have a master plan brewing in that head of yours?"

He laughed. "We might have to go with Plan B. But I do know my list of liabilities has increased."

She took his hand and squeezed. "Mine too. Isn't it funny how life works sometimes?"

"I didn't know what life was until a strange boy pointed a gun at my heart." He continued to stare off into the darkness. "This candy sure is a little piece of heaven."

She rewrapped her bundle and laid it carefully on the wooden planks beside her. She stood, reached down and took his hands, tugging him to his feet. "Can I interest you in seeing the real thing, Mr. Raines? I think I owe you another thank you."

He touched her cheek. "Mrs. McGee, I thought you'd never ask."

Epilogue

Washington, D.C. Autumn, 1869

As they walked down the central staircase, Jessie barely noticed the sights around her. The Willard Hotel was the most beautiful hotel in Washington, D.C., but it seemed like nothing after New York City. New York had surpassed her wildest expectations. She tightened her grip on their hands.

"Don't get yourself all riled up now," Cutter said gently. "Self-control, remember?"

"It's been months since we've seen them. I think my heart is going to jump right out of my chest."

Billy cast a glance at her. "You look beautiful, Jessie girl. Just wanted you to know."

"Thank you." Smiling, she glanced at her midnight blue gown, recently purchased in New York, where they'd all danced until dawn. They'd both worn a silk waistcoat and she'd worn shoes that pinched her toes. Not a good idea.

As she lifted her head something caught her attention. "Oh, my God, they're here!"

She gathered her skirts and flew down the stairs, leaving the men in her wake. Dashing across the lobby, she nearly collided with guests and their luggage coming from all directions. She launched herself forward and into Jane's arms. They danced around in a circle, oblivious for a moment to almost everything around them, nearly knocking a stout man on his ass.

Billy and Cutter came up from behind them and shook hands with Cyrus Sheffield. Jessie turned with Jane in her arms.

"So when can we expect you at Riverbend, Cy?" Cutter asked. "Seems to me the wilds of Kentucky offer a man more than Cincinnati ever could."

Cyrus burst into laughter. "Riverbend is hardly the wilds of Kentucky."

"It's more than we need, but Jessie always liked the place," Cutter said. "Prentice sure didn't need it any more."

"Probably could use the cool breezes where he is though," Billy said. "Hell gets a little hot this time of year."

"Took a while to get him but persistence pays off," Cyrus said.

"Ah," Billy said. "Look at them. It's a sight for my eyes."

Billy's gaze raked across her. Jessie tightened her arm around Jane's shoulder as she gave him a smile offering promises for later. She blushed, hoping no one noticed but she realized Cyrus's attention was focused on Cutter. His blond brow rose as he peered at his friend.

"There's something different about you, Cutter. Every time we meet, you seem more relaxed and—" He glanced at Billy.

Billy nudged Cyrus in the ribs. "He glows now, doesn't he?"

Cyrus laughed. "That could be it, Billy."

Cutter dropped back his head and groaned. "Jesus, Billy, stop saying stuff like that." Jessie felt heat coil inside as he glanced her way. She fanned herself with her hand. "I'm just happy to see *her* so happy."

"Me, too," Billy said. "But I don't glow like you do."

Jessie smiled. "Stop it, you two. You're worse than children. I think we're all glowing tonight. I've got Jane and," she wrapped her free arm around Cyrus, "I always love seeing the mysterious Mr. Sheffield. Cy, we're expecting you at Riverbend for the entire holiday season. Don't disappoint us, okay?"

Cyrus gave her a peck on the cheek. "Never, Jessie. Besides, I think Jane's already packed for the trip." He winked at his wife.

Jessie whirled to face Jane again. She hugged her tight then held her at arm's length. For the first time, she noticed Jane's beautiful green silk gown hugged her tightly over the swell of her belly. "Another one?"

"Yes, another one," Jane said with a smile. "Douglas is almost seven now and Hannah four. We thought it was time. Though you're a fine one to talk, Jessie. You have four now."

"It's really only three," Jessie said. "Martin doesn't count."

"He counts," Jane said.

"Maybe he does." Jessie laughed. "Though it's hard to be a maternal figure when I've always had to crane my neck to scold him."

"You've been nothing short of wonderful with him."

"It was you, Jane. We have you to thank for that."

Jane smiled. "Nonsense. I only started things. You finished them. The children can't wait to see him. They've been talking about nothing but you and Martin since we arrived in town this afternoon. We'll spend the entire day together tomorrow. How's the newest little Raines?"

Jessie sighed. "Livvie is a dream. A perfect baby. Must have more of me in her."

Jane burst into laughter. "Oh, I'm sure." The sound warmed Jessie's heart.

"Livvie is totally unlike the first two. But I certainly can't blame Jake and Abbie. They're just like Cutter and Billy. Can you imagine?" She glanced at her men, who luckily seemed locked in a discussion with Cyrus. "I don't mind their little quirks at all. It adds spice to my life."

"You don't have enough spice with these two?" Jane waved her hand toward the men.

"More than enough. But I love being a mother too. I've finally found something I can do well. Speaking of ... Where is Martin?"

"Right behind you."

Jessie pivoted and gazed up at her brother. Martin's hair, generally slicked back off his forehead, had fallen into his eyes. The curls cascaded around his face and made him adorably cute—not quite the tall, elegant young man who worked for the president. She brushed those curls away and pulled him forward.

Cyrus and Jane wrapped him in their arms simultaneously.

"President keeping you busy, Galahad?" Cyrus asked.

Jessie smiled at Martin's pet name. It seemed everyone in Kentucky and beyond called him that now.

"Very," Martin said. "Though I've been trying to keep Jessie happy the last couple days."

"A sometimes impossible task," Cutter muttered. "He hasn't been back to Kentucky in six months. You'd think the world had ended."

Martin shrugged. "Seems that way around here some days as well, but I've gotten used to it." He leaned closer to Cutter. "He wants to see the three of you."

Cutter's head snapped up and he stared across the room.

"Jesus, Marty, did you tell him we're here?"

Martin shook his head. "No, not me. But he knew."

"Goddamn it, Billy," Cutter growled. "I deliberately ignored that letter."

Billy raised his hands. "It wasn't me, Cutter. I saw it, and even though he sounded desperate, I ignored it. I knew you'd be pissed."

Cyrus shook his head. "Cutter, what are we going to do with you?"

"Sometimes I just like to be left alone," Cutter mumbled.

Jane folded her arms and gave them both a pointed look. "I hope someone had the decency to answer it. It's the President of the United States."

Jessie glanced around the lobby, looking for a hiding place. She gulped and backed up a step, closer to Billy. Cutter whirled to face her.

"You had something to do with this, you little witch."

"Seemed we could do everything at once while we're here," Jessie stammered. "So I told him we'd be coming to see Martin and—"

"We're retired, Jessie," he growled.

"We don't have to be," she said sweetly.

"But I like being a country doctor.

"And I like being your nurse."

"Billy likes being, well, whatever it is he does all day. Who the hell can keep up with him? We both like our life with you. Just our family. Peace and quiet. No presidents."

"I like it too," she said. She looped her arms around his neck and kissed him softly. "But sometimes sacrifices have to be made."

"She's right," Billy said. "If you ask me, Cutter, which of course you didn't—"

Cutter heaved a huge sigh and held up his hand.

Jane's glance darted around the room. "Where is the President?" Martin laughed. "You can't tell?"

Her eyes locked on a large group of men collected around the enormous fireplace against the far wall. Vying for attention, their mingled voices created a cacophony in the elegant lobby. They huddled around a chair in the center of the mass, where cigar smoke wafted up and clung to the air like a summer haze.

"I'd recognize that cigar smoke anywhere," Jessie said.

Martin gave her a cute little smirk. "He's entertaining his lobbyists."

"Lobbyists?" Jane asked.

"Men seeking favors," Martin said. "He calls them lobbyists because they corner him every time he comes here. But don't let his grumpiness fool you. He secretly loves holding court."

Cutter grunted. "That's no secret. Ulysses Grant always liked to hold court. Battlefield, lobby, it makes no difference. If his head got any bigger, he'd run out of hat sizes. I thought I got his claws out of us with the last little favor we did for him."

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Billy clapped him on the back. "The mission didn't sound too bad, Cutter. It's in Kentucky, close to home. Could be a bit of fun."

"If Billy's in, I'm in." Jessie glanced up at Cutter, batting her lashes and giving him her sweetest smile. "What about you, Mr. Raines? Up for a little bit of mayhem?"

Cutter sighed. "Let's try to keep the mayhem to a minimum." "That's my boy," Billy said.

They clasped her hands and the three of them headed across the room to find out what President Grant needed now.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amber Carlton's love of historical romance began when she picked up her first copy of *The Passionate Adventures of Angelique*, following the life and loves of a woman in the 17th century. Amber is entranced by all things historical, but has a special fascination with English and early American history. She lives in the present but loves to write about being "elsewhere".

Her obsessions include the writing of Stephen King, Philip J. Fry and his friends on Futurama, the world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and things that go bump in the night. Her kids and family also hold a special place in her heart.

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